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Bridging the Gap:
A Closer Look at Educational Inequities and Strategies
To Support African American Students

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Abstract

This autoethnography shares our personal experiences, narratives and counter-stories as we view the social justice issues of inequities in the education of African American students. Through our journey we highlighted our personal views and real scenarios as seen through the eyes of a reading specialist, social worker and college level administrator. Critical Race Theory in Education (CRT) served as our primary guiding force allowing us to focus on the following tenets: counter-stories, permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence and critique of liberalism (Dixson, Anderson & Donnor, 2017). Critical Race Theory (CRT) is the framework in Social Sciences that examines society and culture as it relates to categorization of race, law and power (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). The purpose of our study was to take a closer look at inequities that are ignored or not effectively solved for the betterment of African American students. Educational settings serving African American students continued to provide a disservice. This disservice resulted in the recycling of academic failure (Williams, 2017). Our autoethnography has allowed for realism and truth as we shared our personal narratives as to why African American students are struggling academically, emotionally and mentally.

Keywords: Trauma, At-Risk African American Students, Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), Critical Race Theory, (CRT), Mental Health, Achievement Gap

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The education community learning classes in the social justice cohort were an educational think-tank for students to come together and discuss various injustices occurring in educational settings. It was through profound discussions and group activities that we discovered a common interest surrounding the service of African American students who were at greater risk of academic failure. We continued to share rich discussions centered on our personal and professional experiences and challenges in educational settings where students lack appropriate resources, exposure, and access to opportunities that support higher levels of achievement in comparison to their affluent white counterparts (Darby & Rury, 2018). We continued to have small group discussions about the student and parent population in which we served, we discovered common concerns about our African American students. Collectively we agreed that racism within the educational system was a common barrier (Dixson, Anderson & Donnor, 2017). We saw the negative effects of racism in education, rather through the eyes of a reading specialist, social worker or college level administrator. Our passion was in helping our African American students and become successful. We began sharing our own personal stories about our students and our lived experiences. Through that sharing, we discovered our connections as it related to poverty, academic struggles, trauma, and mental health challenges that negatively impact black students (Payne, 2003). We agreed, approaching our work together would bring three different perspectives, from teaching and learning, social and emotional, as well as funding gaps and administration in the field of education. Our common connections allowed us to merge our thoughts and view our topics through

a social justice lens as well as approaching our group work with a holistic approach. Our common connections served as the catalyst that brought us together as a group. Our thought process behind the multi-lens perspective would allow cognitive, emotional and behavioral dimensions as we looked at our work with students, and delve deeply into our roles of reading specialist, social worker and college level administrator. By focusing on students at the elementary level to the post secondary level, and viewing their educational experiences as they were negatively impacted by educational inequities, it allowed us to identify common academic and behavior patterns. We were able to identify and agree that our African American students figuratively carry excessive baggage of poverty, academic struggles, trauma as well as other barriers associated with marginalized people that can suppress academic success. As we developed our multi-lens perspective, we examined how this excessive baggage had the potential of placing African American students at a higher risk of academic, social, and emotional failure as they enter higher levels of education (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). Sharing our different perspectives through an autoethnography approach, allowed our group to utilize self-reflection of our personal experiences. In addition to giving a personal voice to racism, and social justice issues as it relates to educational inequities for African American students, it also allowed for our team to identify strategies to support them with greater success (Bandura, 1986).

Historically African American people have been negatively impacted by racism as early as 1619 which marks the beginning of slavery in North America. African American people have taken a journey marked with pain, struggles, brutality, dehumanization, atrocities, and death (Anderson, 2017). As African American people travel through this journey of oppression and marginalization, we as a group began to transform in mind,

body, and spirit. We had a story to tell about racism and the impact it had on African American students in the educational setting from elementary to post-secondary school.

Throughout history there has not been a sense of urgency to effectively educate, ensure acceptance, inclusion, and the well-being for African American people (Anderson, 2017). Racism remains deeply embedded in the fabric of America and negatively impacts our educational systems (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). From the womb to higher education, African American students remain disadvantaged academically, socially, emotionally, and mentally (Dixon et al., 2017). The playing field for African American students is marred with jagged edges, unlevelled ground, and foundations built on quicksand. Discrimination, inequities, injustice, and death are all terms that are synonymous with the plight and struggle of African American people. African American students from marginalized communities are left hanging in the balance attempting to navigate through educational systems not designed to support their academic success, social and emotional needs, as well as their mental well-being (Dixon et al., 2017). Many of our African American students lack the supports and strategies that allow them to enhance their opportunities for overall success in life. As a result, many are left as victims of a society designed to keep them oppressed, marginalized, and disposable (Freire, 2007).

Educational Inequities for African American Students at the Elementary Level***A Teacher at Heart***

I've always wanted to become a teacher. As early as second grade, I remember playing school in my bedroom. I would have imaginary students, books, and papers spread out across my room. I used my closet door as a chalkboard to list the spelling words and math problems for the day. My great, great grandmother would say, "GiGi sounds like she's in that room with 20 kids." Growing up in the 60's and 70's, my family placed a high priority on reading. Often times I would see my grandparents reading the daily newspaper and my aunts would read stories to me. I come from a family of somewhat educated people who valued education. However, not all of them went to college but most had decent jobs. I always had a love for reading. I remember reading "Tip and Mitten" and "Dick and Jane" books.

As I reflect back, those books were rich with sight words on every page. Of course, sight words are words you learn by sight that can't necessarily be sounded out. "Tip and Mitten" books used phonics, the building blocks of language and the read for meaning method (McKee, 1949). "Dick and Jane" (Gary, 1930) books taught first graders to read using whole-word methods (look and say). Back then reading instruction in school focused on rote memory and word repetition, this helped me become a strong reader. I can't recall any of my classmates at that time being low readers. Many of my classmates including myself came to school preloaded so to speak. We knew our ABC's, address, phone number, how to spell our name, tie our shoes, and count. My great, great, great grandmother encouraged my mom to make sure she got me in Head Scarf, as she called the Head Start Program. The Head Start program had long term benefits for all

students. The Head Start Program was designed to help break the cycle of poverty, provide pre-school for children of low-income families with comprehensive programs to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs (Deming & David, 2009). I was well prepared when I entered elementary school. In the 70's, a strong emphasis was placed on reading, writing, spelling, grammar, and arithmetic.

During my elementary years, schools focused on building basic reading skill foundations, learning spelling patterns, vowel sounds, mastering addition, subtraction, multiplication facts, and division facts. As a kid, I never heard of terms such as learning disabilities or behavior disorders. When I was growing up we didn't have all these fancy educational terms as to why you were failing in school. You were just slow as my grandmother would say and your parents needed to work with you more at home to help you not be slow. By the time I completed 3rd grade I was a proficient reader and writer. Looking back, I now realize that building those foundational skills from preschool to 3rd grade gave me a boost to keep moving up the reading scale. As I look at the students I serve, I see academic gaps and the lack of prerequisite skills to navigate from one skill to the next. I have pondered in total confusion at the fact that many African American students lack these skills. For 27 years I've wondered how African American elementary students have been transported along our educational systems without care. One could conclude this to be a criminal act of educational neglect (McIntosh, 2009). However, I have personally been a witness to such a crime.

Statement of Problem

African American students are at the greatest risk of academic failure. The K-12 education that most black students receive is grossly fraudulent. Students attending high-

poverty schools consistently have low test scores (Williams, 2017). From 1992-2009, white elementary students out performed black elementary students in reading revealing a 25 point difference in favor of white students reading test scores (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). Historically the educating of black people has never been a priority in the United States (Anderson, 2017). The achievement gaps of injustice go hand in hand as we view race, segregated schooling and cognitive abilities. Barriers continue to exist in blocking efforts to increase literacy for black students. Black students are viewed as requiring a different educational treatment that is different from white students. This creates the concept of whites being superior and blacks being inferior (Darby & Rury, 2018). Many black students are moved along an educational system embedded with racism, which never allows opportunities for equal education (Anderson, Dixson & Donnor, 2017). Black students are being tracked and labeled as academically low performers (Browne, 2015). Racial policies and the thought of blackness poses a threat to the educational well- being of others (Dumas, 2016). A racist virus is in the bloodstream of America and slavery is to blame for the disintegration of poor urban families (Moynihan, 1965). The quest for quality education is an on-going struggle for African Americans. Teacher preparation programs fail to meet the needs of preparing teachers to teach children of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000). As long as race, white privilege and all other terms associated with oppression of people of color exist, education will continue to fail black students (McIntosh, 2009).

Rationale for the Study

The rationale for this study is to take a closer look at inequities in education and the negative impact it has on black students I have served throughout my teaching career.

Students living in poverty are impacted the most academically, socially and mentally (Payne, 2003). By figuratively drawing back the curtains and revealing my own personal stories of black students, families and communities, this will allow me to bring realism and reality to the day to day struggles of black elementary students and their families. In addition to giving a sense of awareness to educational inequities that are often times ignored or pushed under the rug. By sharing my personal stories and experiences I will shed light on the fact that our educational systems continue to fail black students (Williams, 2017).

When Eagles Meet Mountains

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere”.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1963, April 16, para. 4)

The Injustice of Trauma

These powerful words inspired my life’s work as a social worker for the past twenty- seven years and they were instrumental in leading me to the doctorate program in education at the University of Missouri- Saint Louis in the fall of 2018. This quote continues to shape and inspire my knowledge around social justice and education. There have been countless injustices witnessed over my years in the career of social services and education which have compelled me to become a thought-provoking scholar who continues to support and promote social equity for African American students and their families in the school system.

One of my most soul-stirring experiences occurred in the summer of 2019 when one of my seven-year-old students was killed playing outside in his backyard with his siblings. The loss of his life, by way of a stray bullet fired in a community full of random gun-shots, took his life at an early age where he would never get to enter that second-grade classroom the next day. I worked with a family who experienced the loss of an innocent life, by a random bullet with no name attached or greater intention than to pierce a target hit from senseless gun violence. This community violence I witnessed, would change the lives of a child, family, and community that I plan to explain later in my personal stories. This event, along with many other traumatic events, has become the catalyst of my work and scholarship to address the injustice, poverty, community violence, chronic trauma, and toxic stress can cause in the lives of students served daily

in educational settings. For this young student, who will never see another new school year, it hurt me to see this tragedy unfold during my career. My research and scholarship can become the premise to protest, advocate, embolden, and educate the masses through counter-narratives and storytelling that challenge the dominant narrative. Addressing the social injustices and structural inequities our African American students experience, in part is my very reason for pursuing this terminal degree to become a scholarly voice for the students and families I serve in marginalized communities.

I believe all students deserve access to quality education regardless of their socioeconomic status, gender, race, neighborhood, or orientation (Raja & Liou, 2016). The harsh reality for many students of color is that trauma exposure in childhood can be associated with lower academic achievement and test scores, lower IQ scores, impaired working memory as well as delayed language and vocabulary (Perfect et al., 2016). What happened to this young African American male child, who was only seven years old, was an injustice in our community and how trauma and community violence disrupted a community's ability to protect students from egregious acts like this claiming their future. As a social worker in the community and educational system, this incident has motivated me to explore how trauma and violence in our community may have impacted motivation and learning in my personal life as well as the lives of students in marginalized communities.

Statement of Problem

Poverty, racism, and community violence can be some of the worst forms of trauma for students in marginalized schools who are expected to be high achieving academically (Bandura, 1986). Far-reaching effects result from violence exposure, as

violent crime rates and racial segregation within the community surpass poverty in predicating low birth of infants and death rates of our youth (Violence Policy Center, 2017). Racial discrimination creates an inequity that usually is not subject to redress, and fosters reactions of helplessness and despair in our children and youth of today (McCrea, 2018). Although the life challenges of African American children from marginalized communities in this country have very real consequences on students' motivation to learn, fixating on these challenges without attempting to address them at a systemic level can create a glass ceiling that hinders their academic achievement (Bandura, 1986). Deficit thinking from our school staff, educators, and administrators who serve students experiencing chronic trauma and toxic stress in their daily lives, creates more feelings of hopelessness and despair in our children and youth attending underperforming schools (Ginwright, 2016). As a result of systemic racism, students who experience low-expectations in the classroom may also encounter prolonged academic difficulties at the next class or grade level (Liou & Rotheram-Fuller, 2016).

Teacher expectations for student learning is a powerful predictor of their educational achievement. The way teachers and school staff view students invariably shapes their educational journey and the ways in which their minds and overall well-being are nurtured (Raja & Liou, 2016). Meeting students where they are emotionally, and how they come to us mentally in the school setting, can offer support to the children, educators, and support staff in the school setting, so we do not further traumatize the students we serve. How we encourage them to achieve academically on our watch can make a huge difference in their motivation to learn and succeed against their statistical odds (Raja & Liou, 2016).

Rationale for the Study

The purpose of this scholarship is to share my lived experiences through well written published research and literature and to document how I have seen trauma and social inequities impact my personal life as well as the lives of my students and families through the lens of Critical Race Theory (CRT). Our society will continue to aid and abet the injustices in our students' experience through traumatic events because it is believed they are automatically resilient (Raja & Liou, 2016). Our students are not able to absorb hurtful and painful experiences as if they are not affected by trauma, and just continue learning in a classroom without a healthy social and emotional outlet and support system to help them unpack their feelings appropriately (Ginwright, 2016).

Witnessing this traumatic community tragedy with one of my students led to the title, "When eagles meet mountains: How trauma from poverty and community violence can impact learning and motivation in African American students from marginalized communities." This calamitous incident of losing one of my young students profoundly shaped and changed my life. Personally experiencing the aftermath of this hapless event with the family, encouraged me to focus my passion for social justice in the communities I work. I have examined and explored how trauma, poverty, and community violence have influenced and changed my life as an African American woman and mother, working in a marginalized community with children and families.

HBCU Mental Health Issues Impacting First-Generation College Students' Success***A Lack of Support***

My journey in working in higher education started 17 years ago. Higher education and the world of academia was very new to me. I was hired as an instructor in the urban specialization department. With a Master's in Public Administration I began teaching classes in urban affairs. My background in community organizing and working with various grassroots and nonprofit organizations as well as facilitating violence and substance prevention programs prepared me for the role of teaching. I was young, eager and energetic to share my work experience and knowledge to students seeking to get a degree in urban affairs and planning to work in the field. As the only African American female working in a department of 7 mostly white males, I remember feeling very clueless in meetings as they were discussing curriculums, degree programs, accreditation, enrollment management, and etc. They offered no assistance as I struggled to understand the whole higher education environment.

I began to doubt whether I belonged in such an environment. The only comfort I had was from a few students that were glad to be in my class, because they felt that I was truly teaching them. As they became more comfortable with me, they began to share their frustrations and experiences from other classes taught by my white colleagues. As time progressed I came to understand my role as an African American educator at a Historically Black College University (HBCU) was very valuable.

Having gone to a predominately white institution for my undergraduate education, I wasn't quite familiar with HBCUs and their purpose. Within time I learned the special role of HBCUs in the African American community. Students look to HBCUs for

mentoring and working with individuals that resemble, understand, and accept them (Linly, 2020). Many of my white colleagues ridiculed and spoke negatively about students in their classes and questioned the admission office on the types of students that were being recruited.

I witnessed one white male colleague in particular consistently giving failing grades in every class to all the African American students. Only A and B grades were given to white students. My white colleagues didn't seem to care or understand the student population they were dealing with. In fact they came from completely different worlds. Some of these students came from environments where they may have experienced poverty, trauma, or educational inequities which affected them mentally. In addition the majority of the student population at the university were first generation college students. Nevertheless, students were completely ignored and didn't receive any type of mental health support from the university.

Later in my years working at this particular HBCU I learned we had the status of being a public open enrollment university which meant that anyone who desired to go to college our doors were open. We were not very selective in the types of students being recruited. As a public open enrollment university and recruiting students from inner city schools, we were recipients of students experiencing trauma and mental illness that had not been treated. Most often these students performed poorly in class and in some cases dropped out of college or taken longer to complete their degree program (Ginwright, 2016). In addition, I have seen several students show up to class angry, defiant or socially withdrawn and since the university lacked adequate staff and resources to assist these struggling students, they end up in the hands of the campus public safety.

Statement of Problem

Completing high school and going to college is an automatic and obvious choice for some youth however for others it's a challenge. It's assumed that youths raised in a household with parents that have college degrees are more likely to attend and complete college (Bird, 2018). However, according to Choy (2001); Ishitani (2006); Pascarella et al. 2004; (Stephens et al. (2012); Woosley and Shepler (2011), "a considerable body of research indicates that students whose parents have not attended college often face significant challenges in accessing postsecondary education, succeeding academically once they enroll, and completing a degree " (p. 2). Students whose parents did not attend college and they are the first to attend are referred to as first-generation college students (Cataldi et al., 2018). First-generation students are at greater risk of not persisting in or not completing credential programs because of such challenges as being less well prepared academically, having children of their own, and working full time while enrolled (Chen and Carroll 2005; Horn and Premo 1995; Mangan 2015; Nunez and Cuccaro-Alamin 1998; Terenzini et al. 1996).

Even with those challenges yet another area that is increasingly growing and getting more attention on college campuses and impacts students' ability to complete their college education is mental illness. This area has often been overlooked especially at HBCUs. According to the American Psychiatric Association (2018), mental illnesses are health conditions involving changes in emotion, thinking or behavior (or a combination of these), this includes anxiety, panic disorder, depression, and bipolar among others. Historically Black Colleges and Universities-Law Enforcement Executives and Administrators and National Center for Public Safety (2018), indicated that HBCUs are

seeing an increasingly vast number of students dealing with mental health illnesses. This leads to questions centered on HBCUs awareness and capability in working with students that have mental health illnesses. Additionally, if they are aware of this increasing population, do they receive financial resources and support comparable to predominantly white institutions dealing with students with mental illness? Furthermore, is this increasing population of students with mental health illness impacting the retention and graduation rates, thus contributing to the closures of HBCUs? Lastly, are they in a position to advocate for increased funding and support services to address mental health illnesses students are experiencing?

According to Linly (2020), HBCUs are on the decline due to a 50 million dollar loss in Plus Loans from the Department of Education, low retention rates, and an increase of online programs offered at other institutions. Because of those challenges, HBCUs may find it difficult to address mental illness among their students. Yet, mental health is a growing concern across all college campuses across the United States, (Lipson et al., 2018). An estimated one in three students meets the criteria for a clinically significant mental health problem and there is also evidence to suggest a rise in the number of students enrolling in college with pre-existing mental health conditions, (Lipson et al., 2018). Arnett, (2017) indicates that mental illness in the African American community is often stigmatized, and most refrain from admitting that they have a mental illness. Students, in general, aren't so quick to walk into a counseling office unless they are being referred by the school administration.

HBCUs that have the status of open enrollment may be more susceptible to issues of mental illness on their campus mainly due to being beneficiaries of first-generation

college students (Cataldi et al., 2018). Many of these students are coming from environments academically underprepared, lack resources, and high exposure to trauma (Bandura, 1986). According to Grove (2020), open enrollment means that a student with a high school diploma or GED certificate can attend with guaranteed acceptance to the college or university. As an educator at an HBCU, I have encountered many students struggling with mental illness and trauma while trying to obtain their degree. Some of these individuals have gone through life suppressing their experiences and emotions without receiving counseling or therapy. So when they come to college they bring their mental health problems with them. Since they have not received therapy, counseling, or medication they find it challenging to adjust to college life and many are unable to remain in college to completion (Cardoza, n.d). Sadly, the retention rate is a constant focus.

Faculty, staff, and administration every year brainstorm on creative ways to keep students engaged academically so they can graduate in 4 years. This push for graduation in 4 years is mainly connected to state and federal funding. Performance budgeting has become a way that state and federal funding determine how much money is allocated to the colleges and universities. According to Miao, (2012), Performance-based funding is a system based on allocating a portion of a state's higher education budget according to specific performance measures such as course completion, credit attainment, and degree completion, instead of allocating funding based entirely on enrollment. The more students these universities graduate in 4 -5 years the more money is allocated to them (Linly, 2020). So it is advantageous for these institutions and universities to strive to report high graduation rates, even if students don't receive the help they need.

Rationale for the Study

Mental illness among college students is a growing trend, (Historically Black Colleges and Universities–Law Enforcement Executives and Administrators and National Center for Public Safety, 2018). First generation college students in particular are most vulnerable to mental health issues (Arnett, 2017). As HBCUs work to increase retention and graduation rates many are finding themselves fighting a losing battle and possibly ignoring student's mental health. From a teaching and administrator perspective in higher education at an HBCU, I have witnessed countless first generation students struggle academically due to anxiety, depression, post traumatic stress and bi-polar. Passion in wanting my students to succeed pushed me to look at the whole student beyond just academics which uncovered many issues related to mental illness. In utilizing critical race theory I shared stories explaining student struggles and how racism, social injustices and inequities in financial support impact HBCUs and their ability to address mental illness among first generation college students, thus negatively impacting retention and graduation rates. By sharing stories of students dealing with mental health issues, I provided insight and a deeper understanding about the educational inequities in higher education as well as the importance of supporting and addressing mental health issues with first generation college students at HBCUs.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms are used throughout sections 2 of the study.

1. Racism- prejudice, discrimination, or antagonism against someone of a different race based on the belief that one's own race is superior (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).
2. White Flight- the phenomenon of white people moving out of urban areas, particularly those significant minority populations, and into suburban areas (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).
3. At-risk students- students that fall into the lowest percentiles (i.e. reading) students lack literacy skills (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).
4. Best Practices- a term generally used to describe those instructional approaches and techniques that improve children's reading development (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).
5. Balanced Literacy- is a philosophical orientation that assumes that reading and writing achievement are developed through instruction (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).
6. Reading Specialist- professionals with advanced preparation and experience in reading who are responsible for the literacy performance of readers in general and struggling readers in particular (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).
7. Reading Intervention- the purpose of reading intervention is to improve student reading by helping increase their decoding, fluency, comprehension or vocabulary (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

8. Guided Reading- instructional approach that involves a teacher working with small groups of students who demonstrate similar reading levels (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).
9. Accreditation- the act of granting credit or recognition, especially to an educational institution that maintains suitable standards (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).
10. Funding Gap- is the amount of money needed to fund ongoing operations or future development of business or projects that is not currently provided by cash, equity or debt (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015).
11. Below Grade Level- unable to read words, sentences and books at mastery level for appropriate grade level (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As we dig deeper into social justice, one must look through a critical lens. Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a vital framework for understanding policies and laws that impact African Americans. CRT reveals the inequities and racial disparities that challenge student achievement and the success of African American students (Anderson et al., 2017).

Through this theory, we as educators and social workers have a means of capturing the stories and counter-narratives of the plight of African American students from all levels of education. We can experience their firsthand accounts. CRT completely acknowledges racism as a major factor that contributes to the negative experiences in education that African American student's encounter (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). CRT allows one to effectively tell the stories of the marginalized population. (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). Our perspectives in our research work are commonly joined together supported by the framework of CRT. These policies and laws sustain and promote racial disparities in educational systems. CRT looks at race, which is relevant to education. We are able to understand how racial inequities in education relates to Caucasian and African American student's educational experience. As we look at racism which is synonymous with injustice, discrimination, and inequity, all play a major role in the miseducation of African American students. This continues to place African American students at higher levels of being at risk for academic failure (Anderson et al., 2017).

As noted by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), race continues to be significant in the United States. U.S. society is based on property rights rather than human rights and the intersection of race and property creates an analytical tool for understanding inequity. As noted by Jonathan Kozol (1991), great inequities exist between the schooling experiences of white middle-class students and those of poor African Americans and Latino students. CRT acknowledges racism as a permanent aspect of life in the United States (Bell, 1992). The strength of CRT is that it allows for the capturing of counter-stories or the narratives of marginalized groups that counter the perspectives of the majority population (Delgado, 1989). The dominant narrative on African American students in our public education is engulfed in deficit theories about them.

CRT has been written to challenge the dominant narrative regarding the inability of students of color to excel in academic spaces or setting (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). In CRT, counter-narratives are the primary way of articulating and developing a coherent (and ultimately collective) narrative that effectively tells our stories and expresses our lived experiences (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). African Americans having access to well-resourced schools has been a struggle since the end of slavery, with stark differences between the educational opportunities available to black and white children and young adults (Anderson, 1988). As Ladson-Billings (2013) has proclaimed, critical race theorists use storytelling as a way to illustrate and underscore broad legal principles regarding race and racial/social justice.

In regards to the critical race theory, Derrick Bell's concept of interest convergence can be seen in the social injustice impacting HBCUs. The interest convergence principle states that "interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will only

be accommodated only when it converges with the interests of whites" (Bell, 1980, p.523).

The principle of interest convergence has two parts. First, the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites in policy-making positions. Second, a racial remedy will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of Whites (Bell, 2004 p.69).

From an interest convergence perspective, HBCUs were originally created for the education of African American in a time of segregation, however when segregation was ruled unconstitutional in the landmark case *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), white policymakers changed the rules and as a result, African Americans began attending predominantly white institutions (U.S. Department of Education, 1991). This helped diversify student enrollment and increase funding in predominantly white schools. HBCUs however began to have financial struggles that continue today because African American students can attend other schools. (Linly, 2020) As a result, many HBCUs are closing their doors due to low enrollment, financial struggles, and accreditation issues. (Linly, 2020). HBCU that are recipients of first generation students may find it difficult to address mental health issues due to being under funded as well as lack of resources to assist students.

Inequities in the Elementary Classroom

Historical Racism in Education

Educating black people has never been a priority in the United States. Looking at our history beginning with slavery in 1619, black people were treated as property and commodities. Laws prohibited slaves from learning to read and write. Throughout history, racism continued to manifest itself through Jim Crow, Black Codes, and Segregation (Anderson, 2017). Similar barriers exist in blocking efforts to increase literacy for black students. The achievement gap and injustice go hand in hand.

“From color to race, segregated schooling became linked to a particular notion of human difference, hinging on cognitive ability and other qualities of mind. Blacks required an educational treatment different in some respect from that of white children. White children, on the other hand, were judged superior in faculties of invention, comparison, and reasoning. Black children were held to be inferior” (Darby & Rury, 2018, p.43).

Struggling Readers

“Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.”

-Nelson Mandela (Mandela, 1994)

According to the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE, 2019), the state assessment results reflect 49.1% of Missouri’s 3rd and 4th grade students statewide are proficient or advanced readers. The subgroup data of African American and Hispanic students reflect 29% as proficient or advanced readers. Racism within our educational systems contributes to those literacy deficiencies (Ewing, 2018). Students of color have not proficiently mastered the basic foundational skills of reading and writing based on state data (DESE, 2019). With rare exceptions, by the time children start school they have developed the ability to use language and have learned a great deal

by listening to stories, following words, illustrations, experiments with writing, and use of oral and written communication with others. Also they have observed print in the community and told stories of their own experiences (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009). Fountas and Pinnell (2009) state,

“however not every culture or every home is focused on literacy. Families deal with different problems and have different values. Economic circumstances vary in homes. After food and shelter have been provided, there may be no money left for purchasing children’s books. Economic or other issues may mean that both parents work at one or several jobs to support the family and their quality time may be spent in activities other than reading and writing. Even affluent families often have schedules that are hectic and the child care these children receive may not include one-on-one literacy experiences” (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009, p. 4).

Racism in the form of segregation

Why does racism still shape St. Louis? Why was segregation more dramatic in St. Louis than similar Midwest cities (Cooperman, 2014). As we look at the cities and various counties in St. Louis, Missouri, there is a sometimes unspoken understanding as to which school districts are more desirable. Missouri may be a Midwest state, but its history reveals Southern roots of slaveholding. Missouri’s theme of racial segregation, policies, political power, health, wealth, education and employment has not been in the best interest of African Americans (Cooperman, 2014). Racism is embedded in our educational systems (Dixson, Anderson & Donnor, 2017).

Anderson (2017), looks at justice, race, and equality through a social justice lens. She identifies a history of injustice endured by black people.

“The trigger for white rage inevitably is black advancement. It is not the mere presence of black people that is the problem; rather, it is blackness with ambition, with drive, with purpose, with aspiration, and with demands for full and equal citizenship. It is blackness that refuses to accept subjugation to give up”

(Anderson, 2017, p. 3-4).

Black students are being tracked and labeled as academically low performers.

Browne (2015), challenges us to view surveillance in many ways from slavery to the present.

Moynihan (1965), reports of a racist virus in America’s bloodstream. Slavery is to blame for the disintegration of poor urban families with fatherless mother centered families. He claims black men never learned the role of providers and protectors.

White Flight and White Privilege

Racial policy discourse is embedded in education. Disproportionally or unequally along with the signification of blackness poses a threat to the educational well-being of others (Dumas, 2016). White flight, the phenomenon of white people moving out of urban areas, particularly those areas with significant minority populations. White people began moving into the suburb (McIntosh, 2009). The problem of racism, white flight and white privilege all impact the educating of black students. Discrimination practices and policies are continued attempts to keep black students and families out of white schools and communities (Fuller, 2018).

The continued problem of racism, white flight, and white privilege all impact the educating of black students. Fuller (2018), looks at data from a University City, Missouri

community make-up from the 1960s to the present. The data revealed discrimination practices and policies.

I have spent the majority of my teaching career working in struggling school districts where economic issues are a concern which often negatively impacts student achievement. I have characterized my students with lacking the necessary reading foundational skills needed to become proficient readers and writers.

Dr. Ruby K. Payne notes that educators must understand poverty before they can understand the poverty-stricken students they teach. Understanding that the following resources: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, knowledge of middle-class hidden rules, and role models all impact the student's ability to be successful or not successful in school (Payne, 2003).

White flight was the beginning of suburbia. The dramatic changes in 1950 that took place in the incorporated Spanish Lake of North County in St. Louis, Missouri prove to be an example of white flight. Once a thriving farming community, military base, and rural retreat, North County was the ideal escape for white Americans living in St. Louis City (Lee, 2014).

Understanding Poverty

Dr. Ruby K. Payne notes that educators must understand poverty before they can understand the poverty-stricken students they teach. Understanding that the following resources: financial, emotional, mental, spiritual, physical, support systems, knowledge of middle-class hidden rules, and role models all impact the student's ability to be successful or not successful in school (Payne, 2003).

Ewing (2018), looks at the racism and its contributing factors to school closings on Chicago's Southside. She analyzes the direct impact on poor black students and their communities. She views politics and education policies as negative culprits of influence.

No educational reform can succeed without teachers and school leaders knowing that black children were never supposed to learn or achieve by the same standards of their white counterparts (Darby & Rury, 2018).

Research-Based Best Practices

Balanced Literacy is a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy. It uses research-based elements of comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonemic awareness, and phonics and includes instruction in the whole group and small group. In addition to reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction, a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction is critical for struggling readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

Response to Intervention (RTI) is a process used to ensure all students are successful learners. A system of placing students into tier levels to ensure they receive appropriate intervention instruction, allowing for rich opportunities for struggling students to achieve their personal best (Stein, 2013).

Crawley and Merritt (1996) note, the main purpose of reading is to understand or comprehend the communication between the author and the author's audience. Struggling readers demonstrate this deficiency in reading. Early literacy foundational skills must be effectively implemented from PreK-3rd grade with continued enrichment throughout the higher grade levels.

Leveled Literacy Intervention (LLI) is a proven research-based intervention for struggling readers. This systematic program incorporates a Balanced Literacy approach in

rebuilding the literacy deficiency learning gaps of struggling readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

Fountas & Pinnell (2009), helps teachers understand how to assess children through observation and then how to go to the next step of taking children where they are and where they need to be through guided reading. Guided reading provides the best support for building all student's literacy skills.

African American elementary students that struggle with comprehension skills cannot read informational text. Cummins (2013), explores assessment driven instruction for grades 3-8. She examines a comprehensive framework in engaging learners to dig deeply into nonfiction text which is a key requirement for statewide assessment success.

Instructional Strategies proven to improve student achievement include nine categories for grades K-12 classrooms. (Gaddy et al., 2001), identifying similarities and differences, summarizing and note-taking, reinforcing efforts and providing recognition, homework practice, representing knowledge, learning groups, setting objectives and providing feedback, generating and testing hypotheses, cues, questions, and advanced graphic organizers.

Dorn & Soffos (2001), examines tools that shape the cognitive development of young readers and writers by creating environments that make literate thinking a top priority for students.

Fountas & Pinnell (2011) note in "The Continuum of Literacy Learning of Grades PreK-2nd", children learn by talking and children need to process large amounts of written language. The ability to read and comprehend text is expanded through talking

and writing. Learning deepens when children engage in reading, talking, and writing about text across many different instructional contexts.

According to the 2019 Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), my current district consists of 98% of African American students, with 99.7% receiving free and reduced breakfast/lunch. District wide 13.1% of African American 3rd graders are proficient and advanced readers, 49.1% are basic readers and 33.5% are below basic readers. District wide 17.5% of African American 4th graders are proficient and advanced readers, 26.6% are basic readers and 60.4% are below basic readers.

When Eagles Meet Mountains and Trauma

The following review of selected literature offers a strong understanding of the factors necessary to understand how trauma can impact African American students from underserved communities and affect their overall academic achievement and educational success. This literature review shares findings regarding factors discussing the impact of trauma and academic success for African American students in low performing public school systems within marginalized communities. The literature review is organized according to trauma/community violence, counter-storytelling/deficit thinking, emotional relationships, and innovative healing and restorative practices with African American students.

Trauma & Community Violence

Trauma has been identified as a sudden, life-threatening event, in which an individual may feel horrified, terrified, or helpless and includes such events as a person experiencing or witnessing violent assaults (American Psychiatric Association, 1994). An examination of at-risk minority youth living in underserved neighborhoods revealed that ninety percent of students had exposure to at least one traumatic event or had extensive trauma histories consistent with the need for mental health support and consultation (Salazar, Keller, Gowen, and Courtney, 2013). Intergenerational trauma is defined as a psychological theory which suggests that trauma can be transferred from one generation to the next based on past events. Children can inherit the changes that occur in how their parents' genes are expressed due to their environmental stressors experienced (Degruy, 2005).

Students diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) show greater school-related impairment in comparison to trauma-exposed children without PTSD (Weems, 2013). Exposure to community violence is among the most detrimental experiences children can have, impacting how they think, feel, and act. Children who experience violence are more likely to become ensnared in a cycle of violence that can lead to future violent behavior or tendencies towards aggression (McCrea et al., 2015). High poverty, high crime urban U.S. communities are more often the neighborhoods of poor African American youth lacking the social, educational, and recreational resources available in wealthier and more affluent communities (Allard, 2009; Lindsey, 2008). When parents suffer because they have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), like poverty, community or family violence and racism their personal health can be affected profoundly as a result (Felitti, 1998). This very factor can influence and impact their children experiencing intergenerational trauma passed down as a horrible legacy (Stepleton, 2018). Worldwide, most community violence coexists in our neighborhoods that tend to have the highest levels of poverty (Hoffman, 2011). Poverty tends to affect cognitive outcomes in our youth and can manifest in our schools as poor academic achievement, low attendance and mental health challenges with our students served (Duncan & Brooks-Gun, 2000). Violence exposure in the community has also been linked to mental health problems during childhood and adolescence. Psychiatric disorders including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are found at higher rates among youth exposed to community violence. This kind of stress on the brain can adversely impact brain development and learning in children from its traumatic effects (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011). Some researchers

have examined how structural conditions such as poverty contribute to violence and trauma in communities (Bollard 2003). Our traumatized students can exhibit poorer attendance, disruptive behaviors, aggression, hyperactivity and impulsivity, defiance and more school suspensions, grade retention, as well as depression, anxiety, and low self-esteem (Perfect, 2016). There is no doubt that poverty, increasing gun violence, and lack of employment have taken a toll on our families living in urban neighborhoods (Bryant & Phillips, 2013). Public schools in the most impoverished and marginalized communities struggle to show sustained advancement even with excellent leadership in place.

Institutions contending with high student mobility rates and having absence related problems or irregular attendance along with infrequent parental involvement noticed the least improvement in achievement for their students (Darby & Rury, 2018). Exposure to traumatic and high-stress environments often lead to behavioral challenges in school.

Both chronic and acute exposure to traumatic stressors can erode our student's aspirations and dreams if proper interventions are not put in place to support their development (Ginwright, 2016).

Counter-Storytelling & Deficit Thinking

The point of storytelling is not to vent or rant or be an exhibitionist regarding one's struggle (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). Unfortunately, far too many would-be critical race theorists in education use the narrative or counter-story in just that way. Many of the counter-stories have focused on the experiences of students of color in our schools and communities (Dixon et al., 2017). Counter-storytelling can play a theoretical-methodological role in our research practices. It can also enable the building of a community among marginalized groups, allowing for some challenging views from the

dominant culture by offering alternative thoughts and lived experiences of African American students (Lynn & Dixon, 2013).

The pervasiveness of deficit-thinking and framing offers a grim view of African American learners in urban spaces (Milner, 2008). Offering counter-narratives from the experience of school leaders, educators, parents, students, and involved community members gives voice and visibility to students and adults who are often silenced and ignored through deficit thinking narratives. Counter-narratives challenge people in scholarship to consider an optimal view with people of color and the professional world they navigate daily.

Counter-storytelling presents useful tools to combat inferior narratives and unearth unexposed or unexplored truths that may complicate or disrupt existing narratives, ultimately exposing and critiquing dimensions of racial inequity and uplifting marginalized perspectives. (Delgado & Stefame, 2017) There are complicit biases still affecting the work done in education every day. We need more positive perspectives through counter-narratives to educate, inform, and build cultural competence in our schools with our teachers, administrators, and school staff (Dixon et al., 2017). This is one of many ways we can work to reform our educational system to include more students of color for academic success. African-Americans need to give voice, relevance, and meaning to their lived experiences, especially in the field of education (Lynn & Dixon, 2013).

Thinking through the scholarship explored, the most frustrating concept we learned explored the idea that racism is a permanent woven fabric of our society (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). This creates no fairy tale with a happy ending in the work of social

justice. In counter-narratives, we are looking for the moral of the story to ascertain the true lesson for life to change the dominant narrative (Dixson et al., 2017). Unfortunately, this line of work tends to produce small wins and gains along the journey that encourages social justice warriors to stay diligent in the struggle for equity for students in education. We may need to surround ourselves with numerous success stories to stay committed to the work. I believe we can make a difference by accomplishing strides forward by telling our stories and giving our lived experiences validity, voice, and visibility. This is exactly what I came to do as a practitioner in the work, create a space of visibility. I have seen our students of color have their voice silenced, devalued, and made invisible in a racist society. This scholarship work is meant to ensure our students of color are heard and seen as valuable and worthy of a quality education in our country. Counter-narratives can play a huge role in how we fight for visibility, equity, and social justice in our world (Dixson et al., 2017).

Counter-stories help destroy the mindset that allows our dominant culture to subordinate people of color in our society (Dixson et al., 2017). Counter-stories and trauma informed training appear to be a couple of supports to educate school staff, educators, and administrators to evolve beyond a deficit thinking mentality, and effectively address the social and emotional needs as well as academic needs for our students. My goal is to explore this concept and shed light on the understanding gained through research and scholarship learning through an autoethnography to share my lived experiences in the field of education and how racism has impacted my personal and professional journey.

Systemic institutionalized racism and education inequity toward HBCUs contributes to low retention and graduation rates especially among students that are dealing with mental illness (Hawkins, 2019). A review of the selected current research highlights studies and findings that indicate racism and social injustices disproportionately affect first-generation college students with mental illness in post-secondary schools. The literature review is organized according to the history of HBCU, first-generation college students, support services, and counseling services.

HBCUs and Mental Health Issues

History of Historically Black Colleges and Universities

HBCUs were established to provide education to African Americans who were not able to attend colleges/universities that whites attended. The origins of these colleges and universities date far back to at least the 1800s, (US Department of Education, 1991). Many of these universities educated prominent leaders that have made a profound impact on our society today (Guidry, 2017). Civil rights pioneers like Martin Luther King, Jr., Morehouse, Medgar Evers, Alcorn State, Rosa Parks, Alabama State, Stokely Carmichael, Howard University, WEB Dubois Fisk University, and Thurgood Marshall, Lincoln University, attended HBCU and they were responsible for the changes in civil rights laws we see and live today, (US Department of Education, 1991). Still today HBCUs play a very vital role in the African American community, although we live in a diverse world the HBCUs provide an educational space that allows African Americans to experience their own culture and feel respected (Writers, 2019). Elwood L. Robinson, chancellor of Winston-Salem State University believes HBCUs still exist because they provide a culture of caring that prepares students to contribute to their communities, a

culture that builds confidence, and that gives them the essential skills they need to cultivate a career (Writers, 2019). Today, however some HBCUs are enduring hardships and are on the brink of closing, due to rising college costs, student loan crisis, state and federal budget cuts (Smith-Barrow, 2019)

First-Generation College Students

In HBCUs nearly three in five attendees are low –income, first generation college students and over seventy percent have limited resources (Smith-Barrow, 2019).

According to Troy, (2019) HBCUs are known for enrolling a high number of first-generation students who need academic remediation. HBCUs often implement innovative strategies to support student success. These strategies include success coaching, early alert programming, Summer Bridge programming for at-risk students, pre-entry remedial programming, academic advisement tutorial services, first-year experience programming, peer mentoring, peer tutoring, pre-orientation workshops, academic programming within residential halls, and the utilization of technology (Troy, 2019).

Interestingly, HBCUs are finding themselves struggling to compete for Black students as predominantly white institutions are recognizing the power of diversity and are offering attractive financial assistance and scholarships while atoning for their role in a racist system (Smith-Barrow, 2019).

Counseling Services

First generation college students are most vulnerable to mental health issues. Many of the issues they may experience include guilt, depression, anxiety, social awkwardness, and self -doubt (Stebbleton, Soria, and Huesman, 2014). With the recent tragedies of gun violence on college campuses, students' mental health is becoming

increasingly important to colleges and universities nationwide. “Stress-related anxiety and depression rank as the most common mental health concerns of today’s college students” (Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2019, p. 5). There are many stressors, situations and behaviors including trauma that lead to anxiety and depression that can affect a student’s psychological and physical health. African-American college students, especially those in their first year, may be most at risk. Like African-American adults, these African-American students are less likely to get help due to stigma and a cultural mistrust of health professionals who lack cultural competence (Hawkins, 2019).

Although many colleges and universities offer counseling services they find that African-Americans are least likely to take advantage of mental health services available (Chance, 2019). According to Historically Black Colleges and Universities – Law Enforcement Executives and Administrators and National Center for Campus Public Safety, (2016) mental illness is increasing in America and it’s really showing up on college campuses. Historically Black Colleges and universities are finding it difficult to meet student’s mental health needs due to lack of resources, insufficient training, outdated policies and procedures. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2018), reported nearly one in five college-age adults (18-25 years old) suffers from a mental illness, and more than 7% had serious thoughts of suicide in the previous year. Furthermore, African-Americans, are 20% more likely to struggle with depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, suicide, and post-traumatic stress disorder, in addition to being more likely to be subjected to social conditions which lead to mental illness (Arnette, 2017).

Degges-White & Borzumato-Gainey (2013), reported that an increasing number of college students arriving on campuses are struggling with mental health disorders in addition to managing the typical college transitions challenges. According to the National Alliance on Mental Illness (2012), depressive disorders and anxiety disorders are just two of many significant self-reported presenting issues college counselors might be called on to address. Many students are struggling with mental illness from depression, bi-polar to anxiety, post- traumatic stress disorder, and substance abuse (Kwakyee & Ogunbiyi, (2019). There is often a disparity between what is happening on campuses and what is happening in classrooms. Those who work as university lecturers, professors, personal tutors, and support staff – regularly encounter students in distress, yet they are largely removed from the conversation of mental health, (C. Connor, personal communication, March 18, 2020).

So what are HBCUs doing regarding the increasing enrollment of students with mental illness issues? Historically Black Colleges and Universities – Law Enforcement Executives and Administrators and National Center for Campus Public Safety (2016), concerned with mental health issues on HBCU campuses conducted a forum to discuss the challenges they face with students and services. The forum included thirty-eight campus public safety executives, and professionals, from twenty-eight HBCUs in fourteen states. The reported key findings identified throughout the discussion indicated a need for increased staffing, training and clearer policies and procedures (Historically Black Colleges and Universities – Law Enforcement Executives and Administrators and National Center for Campus Public Safety, 2016). This report is a clear indication that HBCUs are aware that this is a problem and they are proactively attempting to strategize

on dealing with this issue. It would be interesting to take a closer look at each HBCU to see what type of services and support mechanisms are in place to assist students in dealing with this issue.

Another interesting aspect related to this issue of mental illness among African Americans is the historical context. Logan & Denby, (2011) identified three major periods affecting African American mental health, slavery, emancipation, and systemic issues unique to twentieth-century America. Each period had a profound impact on African Americans.

Slavery was connected to the status of being free or being enslaved. Samuel Cartwright, a doctor in the South diagnosed slaves with two types of insanity, draptomania, and dysaesthesia aethiopis. Draptomania described those slaves who tried to escape and a diagnosis of dysaesthesia aethiopis was given to those seen as idle and disrespectful of the master's property. Emancipation, sanity was defined by the behaviors that slave masters valued such as "docile" hardworking laborer who paid him proper respect. Those who eschewed this behavior found themselves in asylums, jails, and the poor house. Also, doctors continued to publish medical information that associated Blacks with insanity or limited intelligence.^[HT9] In the twentieth-century period the mental health of blacks was characterized by inferior treatment and severe mental health diagnosis. For instance, Blacks were diagnosed with schizophrenia instead of depression. By the 1930's research on African Americans began showing they had higher rates of insanity as compared to Whites, which

may be evidence of racist diagnostic patterns in response to increased resistance to adverse conditions faced by African Americans (Logan & Denby, 2011 p.5-6).

My final thoughts regarding the mental illness experienced by African Americans, I believe that racism, discrimination, and prejudices being experienced in our society have a direct impact on mental illness being experience among African Americans. Children growing up in poverty and families living with fewer resources in our society today has had a direct impact on our mental capacity. College students today are dealing with a lot of pressure to succeed. First-generation students especially, making the transition to college can be very tough if there are no support mechanisms in place. Colleges and universities may find the retention rates could increase and graduation rates may increase if they invest in the support services for students especially those that are dealing with mental illness.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is emerging as a powerful theoretical and analytical framework within educational research (Duncan, 2000; Lynn, Yossa, Solorzano, & Parker, 2000). CRT as a framework in Social Sciences examines society and culture as it relates to categorization of race, law and power (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). CRT serves as our primary guiding force allowing us to focus on the following tenets: counter-stories, permanence of racism, whiteness as property, interest convergence and critique of liberalism (Dixson, Anderson & Donnor, 2017).

Qualitative research is “an inquiry process of understanding” where the researcher develops a “complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Ethnography (Creswell, 2018) is a design of inquiry from sociology in which the researcher studies the shared patterns of behavior, language, and actions of an intact culture group in a natural setting over a prolonged period. Autoethnography is described as a qualitative form of written research that seeks to describe and systematically analyze a personal experience in order to understand a cultural experience or phenomenon. We will use autoethnography as a method to share our personal experiences, narratives and counter-stories as we view the social justice issues of inequities in the education of African American students. Through our journey we highlight our personal views and real life experiences as seen through the eyes of a reading specialist, social worker and college level administrator.

This form of qualitative research uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to write and express a lived experience (Bochner & Ellis, 2016). Autoethnography is becoming a particularly useful and powerful tool for researchers and practitioners who deal with human relations, especially in the field of education, social services and multicultural settings where educators, social workers, counselors and clergy professionals work. As a method, autoethnography is observed as research and reader friendly. This inquiry method allows our team easy access to primary data from the beginning because the source is us as the researchers (Chang, 2008). This methodology offers benefits for us as a team to enhance cultural understanding of ourselves and others as well as our experiences and practices with others to support our transformation as researchers to motivate the work toward social justice equitable advocacy and working toward cross-cultural coalition building in scholarship (Denzin, 2014).

Our team has chosen to write collective autoethnographies in order to offer narratives expressing our lived experiences from our childhood to our daily professional lives in the field of education as it relates to the permanence of racism within our educational systems (Bell, 1992). A realistic view (Bell, 1995) of continued racism in America plays a dominant role in education. Examining race through the educational experiences of African American students gives a perspective of how race and racism operate (Dixson, 2004).

As researchers, we understand the importance of storytelling in the path of social justice and the challenge of evolving the movement of social equity. We want to address how we have experienced racism in our lives and how it has impacted our journey as professional African American women from three different perspectives in our writings.

The permanence of racism reveals that racist hierarchical structures govern all political, economic and social domains which allocate white privilege (Bell, 1995). Our goal as a team is to create a safe space under this framework to teach one another through our lived experiences and give visibility and voice as a gift of empowerment to inspire cultural learning, lessons of hope and to transgress through scholarship (Denzin, 2014).

The autoethnography method allows for the study of a culture's relational practices, common values and beliefs. These shared experiences are for the purpose of helping insiders and outsiders better understand the culture (Maso, 2001). By incorporating an autobiographical method, allows for reader engagement and the use of conventions of storytelling (Ellis & Ellingson, 2000). Narrative ethnographies refers to text presented in the form of stories that incorporate the ethnographer's experiences, descriptions and overall analysis of others (Tedlock, 1991). According to (Denzin, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 2006), writing personal stories makes witnessing possible. This allows readers to observe and better testify on behalf of an event, problem or experiences.

We want to inspire other educators to consider CRT as a means of understanding the academically struggling black student. We want to challenge educators to go beyond just understanding them but seek more effective ways to educate them. In addition to recognizing CRT as a guide that identifies why they struggle academically. Chang (2008) speaks of autoethnographies as a narrative style that speaks to the reader on a more personal level. This autoethnography will allow for reader and researcher connections in real experiences.

This autoethnography qualitative study identifies, explains, analyzes, and examines how my journey in the field of education and social services serves as a catalyst for change and social justice with the students I serve in low performing schools. My study examines the practice of social justice through a critical race theory (CRT) lens as the theoretical framework in my research. I share and speak to my personal experiences and professional observations of my life and the lives of my son, students, and families in their natural setting. The aftermath of slavery is not only a historical moment of trauma but of systemic oppression through the form of education, healthcare, housing and our legal system for families in poverty (Dixon, & Lynn, 2013). Critical race theory supports how we tell our stories to counteract the information disseminated through the dominant culture (Dixon, & Rousseau, 2017). This theory helps give visibility to my life and my culture that can feel invisible in my brown skin. I often feel viewed through a lens of deficiency and inferiority as a student and professional in our society. Thus, the tenet of counter-narratives provides powerful insight into how the educational structure has offered inequities for me as a student and woman of color.

My overarching research inquiry for this study offers collaborative writing with my colleagues in an autoethnography sharing our lived experiences that have shaped our work as scholars in the field of social justice and education. My personal experiences include traumatic events experienced in my life as well as accounts of racist practices I have endured in my kindergarten through college journey, parenting as a single mother, and professional career. I have utilized three stories in my autoethnography to analyze and explain how trauma and social injustices have personally impacted my own motivation to learn in my younger years of education, how I have witnessed trauma

impact my son's learning experience, as well as the work I have done with students and families I serve experiencing traumatic events through community violence in their lives. I have utilized one of the tenets in Critical Race Theory (CRT) counter-storytelling to share my journey as an African American woman, mother, and social worker to understand how trauma and racism has demotivated and challenged me in America. My examination has analyzed and dispelled many myths and messages given by our dominant culture about African Americans' lived experiences and how we cope with racist practices and injustices through white privilege in our culture. My hope is to add to the scholarship and knowledge through my lived experiences that shaped my work with my students as a scholar in the field of social justice and education.

This qualitative study analyzes and discusses in a reflexive manner. Three personal stories will be presented as evidence as a counter-narrative from one of the tenets through Critical Race Theory (CRT). This writing is supported with peer reviewed literature, research in CRT, social justice, trauma informed care, poverty and community violence. My purpose of sharing this autoethnography is to share how trauma, racism, community violence, and poverty have hindered, and propelled me as an intersected minority in America. Storytelling is used to inspire a need to continue advocating for social justice, equity in our community to promote African American students' personal value and worth (Dixson et al., 2017). I want my voice to add visibility and validity to the challenges and lived experiences of people of color in the field of education and social services in America.

This qualitative study will be using an autoethnography approach, through the use of three to four stories, I will reflect on sixteen years of work experience in higher

education at an HBCU working with first-generation students dealing with mental health issues. Utilizing Critical Race Theory as the theoretical framework will allow me to explore social injustices experienced by HBCUs as compared to predominantly white institutions and their ability to address mental health issues among their students.

By using Derrick Bell's principle of interest convergence I will discuss the implications of predominantly white institutions justification in attempting to diversify the student body and the impact it made on HBCUs enrollment. My role as professor, department chair, and assistant dean will assist in sharing many experiences that I have had in working with students dealing with mental health issues including suicide, depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress. For example I had a student that came to my office unannounced one day as I was working. The student usually had a bubbly personality and was very friendly.

However, on this particular day she showed up wearing very dark sunglasses and appeared sad. I could tell something was wrong. She asked if she could speak with me privately. I said sure, as she closed the door she stated Ms. Daily-Davis I don't know where to begin. I asked her well what's going on? All of a sudden the student burst into tears crying uncontrollably. When I asked her what was wrong, she replied I don't know I just feel like my life is a mess. She further went on to tell me her whole life story about how her mother died when she was young so she lived with her aunt, her father was abusive and in her first year of college she was gang raped by a group of boys. I asked her if she had received any type of counseling after these traumatic events and she replied no. This student had been carrying this excessive baggage while attending college and

was struggling in her classes. She mentioned how some days she feels depressed and some days she's okay.

This student was referred to the university counseling office, however with the limited resources available the student felt that she was not getting the counseling and help that she needed and was unable to focus academically. After two years of struggle she decided to leave the university. Sadly, she is one of many students that didn't make it to the finish line for graduation.

These stories will provide insight on a university's awareness and ability to address mental illness among first generation college students. This scholarly contribution will thus allow valuable insight to the issue of HBCUs in general and their awareness and ability to address mental health issues when dealing with first generation college students.

CHAPTER 4

NARRATIVES

Educational Inequities for African American Students at the Elementary Level: A Reading Specialist's Personal Narratives

Racism Through the Eyes of a 2nd Grader

My mother was a single parent. We lived in Jennings, Missouri in the 1970s. As an elementary school student, I didn't know much about the term racism. I knew that black people were treated differently for some reason. I was the only black girl in my 2nd grade class along with another black boy. Being the only black girl in class didn't seem to bother me much. I don't recall being sad. Maybe at that young age I didn't know what to feel. I do remember the white girls didn't play with me. However, one white girl named Mary (pseudonym) became my only friend. Mary (pseudonym) was overweight and I was the black girl. As I currently reflect, I guess we were the outcast of the 2nd grade class. It didn't seem to bother either of us, we were content with playing at recess and eating lunch together.

The white boys in the class tended to be more of a problem than the white girls. I remember leaving school walking across the school bridgeway and one of my white male classmates hit me for no reason. Well, after I finished going upside his head with my Walt Disney metal lunchbox, he never bothered me again. So, even as a 2nd grader I knew I had to defend myself but still could not figure out why this white boy hit me. Then there was Patrick (pseudonym) a blue eyed, platinum blonde white boy who thought it was his responsibility to tell me a daily n-word joke. Most of the time I ignored him but this particular day I guess I had run out of patience with him. I recall walking

down the school hallway with my class. Patrick (pseudonym) was walking behind me. I remember balling up my fist and giving him a strong left jab to the face. He turned red as a bleeding beet and grabbed his face. He didn't hit me back, he just stood there holding his face.

My 2nd grade teacher was a middle aged white woman and I think she knew Patrick had been harassing me. She intervened by telling us to keep walking in line and never bothered to ask why I hit him or the cause of our problem. As I reflect back I don't recall any feelings of mistreatment from my 2nd grade teacher but there was not a real teacher student connection either. Thinking of my current knowledge of Critical Race Theory (CRT) this was an example of racism, a major contributing factor to the negative educational experiences of African American students (Lynn & Dixson, 2013). Patrick was exercising his white privilege rather he knew it or not he was comfortable with displaying his disrespect towards a black person. My current assumption is that through his eyes it was his all white school and I was an unwanted visitor.

White privilege is the racial injustice and institutional injustice that's embedded in America, which impact the daily lives of black people (Wise, 2015).

During the 1970s, Jennings, Missouri was a white middle class community and black families slowly began to move in. This was a time after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and black people were still considered not acceptable neighbors or classmates for many whites at the time. Missouri may have been a Midwest state, but its history reveals Southern roots of slaveholding. Missouri's theme of racial segregation, policies, political power, health, wealth, education and employment has not been in the best interest of African Americans (Cooperman, 2014). So, I can assume that many of Missouri's themes

of racial segregation, policies, political power, health, wealth and education were still running rapid in the 1970s, which had an impact on my educational experiences.

As I continue to share my personal experiences as a child and student, I must incorporate components of (CRT) as well as factual history to identify common experiences of my own childhood school experiences to those of my students. I recall walking home from elementary school and a car drove past me. There were white people in the car and one of them yelled out the car window the n-word directed towards me. I guess I did not have sense enough to be afraid. I just kept walking home as if nothing happened.

At the age of seven I accepted the fact that black people were treated differently for some reason. Glaude (2017) refers to the term racial habits as it relates to how we view the world. For example, I accepted the fact that black people were treated differently, being the only black girl in class and living in a neighborhood that was considered the white part of town were my racial habits. Unbeknownst to me, I was displaying my racial habits at the age of seven. Of course as a kid I heard of terms like prejudice but I really didn't comprehend the full root of it. My mother shielded me from a lot of things and made sure I did not want for anything. I was a black girl living in a beautiful apartment complex with blossoming trees and green grass. I attended a good school that offered me the same academic curriculum as the white students. However, could I really say my elementary school experience was the same as my white classmates. My white classmates probably had a sense of belonging, a sense of being the ruling majority as well as a daily reminder of white must be right. Their thoughts may have been white must be right, because my teachers look like me.

The notion of cultural relevance in my opinion was probably not the buzz word in the 1970's school curriculum. My history and culture as a black student was not represented in textbooks or my history may have been somewhat distorted, in addition to school staffing of only white teachers and principals (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Ladson-Billings (2009) speaks of education and access to schooling being the cherished privilege among black people during the civil rights movements. I can only assume my mother was content with having the opportunity to send me to what she considered a good school. Much literature research in the 1960s focused on teaching the disadvantage and the 1970s focused on effective schools. Even though the focus was effective schools in the 1970s, there was not a goal in place to prepare teachers to meet the needs of African American students (Ladson-Billings, 2009). I was disciplined, bright and knew that school was important. Perhaps if I would have displayed what was considered unacceptable behavior or failing grades my 2nd grade experience would have been different. I'm quite sure racism would have been a part of my experience but perhaps with a different negative impact.

As I reflect on my own childhood and student experiences, I can connect them to my own beliefs. I can connect them to my teacher role and the impact I've had on my students. I continue to peel back layers of understanding for myself as it relates to racism and how it has influenced my role as a teacher.

Student Teaching and the First Year Teacher

I graduated from Fontbonne University in 1993 with a bachelor's degree in elementary education with an emphasis in special education. I found myself in a similar situation of being the only black woman in some of my courses. There were a handful of

black students enrolled in the entire university and I was often glad to see at least two additional black students in my class. I knew all of the black students enrolled in elementary and secondary education. We all formed a close bond during our time at the university. The majority of my student teaching was done in school districts where there was a somewhat diverse student population. Many of these districts consisted of African American, Caucasian and Latino students. This was really appealing to me, as a teacher I wanted to teach all students regardless of their race.

Many of my white classmates did student teaching in affluent white districts. As I recall, it was not a requirement for students to engage in more diverse student teaching experiences. This was a case of white privilege having the mindset of being the dominant race and not having a need to consider teaching students of color (Wise, 2015). We were given a list of districts that would allow our university students to take part in student teaching at their schools. The list was not a diverse list of districts, however there were a few St. Louis, north county school districts. We as student teachers all had the mindset of doing student teaching in school districts that could be potential jobs after graduation. Speaking personally for myself a district with student diversity was my preference.

One of my student teaching experiences was in a large north county school district. This experience focused on special needs students with learning disabilities and behavior disorders. The special education teacher was a white female with a white female aide. The students were black males ranging from age 8 to 11. My white college advisor thought it would be a great opportunity to learn from this white special education teacher. She often bragged about this teacher's ability to be effective in the area of classroom behavior management. On my first day of student teaching in this setting, I immediately

observed that only black male students were in this self-contained classroom. The male students were strategically placed throughout the classroom. Keeping them apart with the least amount of interaction with each other seemed to be a part of this teacher's behavior management plan. The special education teacher suggested that I observe the daily routine for the first day.

The classroom space was not very large, it was somewhat cramped. However, the classroom environment was a controlled environment. Each male student was controlled by a point system, a point for sitting, a point for completing assignments, a point for not talking out and the list went on. The teacher and the aide sat in front of the classroom behind their desk issuing out points for this and that as if they were pilot and co-pilot of an aircraft. My college coursework in behavior management was taught by white instructors and as I reflect back it all was based in having control over the student's behavior. I remember the faces of these black male students. Faces of anger and sadness often were the facial expressions of the day. Point systems and tracking systems utilized to label black students as academically low performers with unacceptable behavior (Browne, 2015). Observing this all black male self-contained classroom confirmed the racist tone that blackness poses a threat to the educational well-being of others (Dumas, 2016). My assumption is that these black male students were removed from the regular school population and placed under surveillance or tracking (Browne, 2015).

Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to assimilationist teaching where the teacher develops societal categories of where African American students should fit. In addition to the notion of African American students must be controlled in order to teach them. African American student's behavior and mannerism must mimic white attributes to be

accepted. At the time I did not know what to call this type of classroom management. However, I knew it did not feel right.

Finally it was time for me to interact with the students. I was given the daily point sheet for each student I worked with. I thought it was best for me to build positive relationships with the students. I didn't want to come across as this rigid cold uncaring person. I utilized the point sheet, however when a student received a negative point I attempted to talk to them and gave them an opportunity to explain. I wanted the students to understand why the point was taken and what they could have done differently for a more positive outcome. I think my process was working, most of the students didn't mind talking to me and seem to let their guard down somewhat. I'm not saying they miraculously turned into perfect students but some of those sad anger faces turned into half smiles. I finally completed my student teaching with this group of students. My final grade was a B, the special education teacher said I did fine with preparing lessons and utilizing the point sheet. She stated that I spent too much time talking and lecturing to the students about their behaviors. I assumed that she wanted me to be uncaring and solely dependent on a point sheet to keep the black males under control. My student teacher supervisor was white as well and between the both of them my final grade was determined. I didn't try to fight it, I took the grade and moved on, after all it was my last semester and I was more than ready to graduate.

Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to teachers with culturally relevant practices who believe that all students can succeed. My observations of the white teachers in this self-contained classroom revealed their low expectations for their black male students and

student failure was inevitable. Keeping students under control with the least amount of interaction with student to student or student to teacher appeared to be the goal.

My final reflection of this experience was, who do these white women think they are. I'm a black woman who knows how to put on my black mama's hat to keep these black male students in line. Building positive relationships with all students, especially African American students has proven to be an effective strategy. Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to building those classroom social relations that extend to the community. African American males are overrepresented as it relates to special education placement. African American males have been identified with learning disabilities, behavior disorders, retardation among other labels (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001).

Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to the United States teaching force as being predominantly white middle class females. These white middle class females come from white middle class neighborhoods and have been educated in predominantly white colleges. I truly believe I witnessed a vivid example of how white middle class female teachers believed their controlling and low expectations of their black male students was the best way to educate them.

Ladson-Billings (2009) speaks of micro classroom interactions, the mid-level institutional school practices and policies such as student tracking as well as disciplinary practices which have contributed to the educational struggle of African American students.

My final student teaching experience was in a smaller district. The student population was predominantly middle income to lower income whites. A few black students attended this district, however the district attendance lines were drawn in a way

that clearly distinguished where the white and black students resided. The staffing was also predominantly white from top to bottom.

My final student teaching assignment was at an elementary school. The teacher was a middle aged white male who seemed to welcome me wholeheartedly to his class. He was very open to what I needed to do for my coursework. The classroom setting was a traditional setting with desks in rows, learning posters and classroom decorations. It was conducive to a positive learning environment. The class consisted of white males, white females and a few black students. This student teaching experience was my overall best one. I saw myself as this traditional teacher teaching a combination of students, however not as diverse as I would have preferred. Even though this experience was somewhat better, I still was reminded of the fact it was not too many staff members or students in the building that looked like me. However, it was not like the depressed feeling that would come over me during my special education student teaching with the overrepresented black males. Even though this setting had equity concerns within the staff and student populations, I accepted the fact that this was as diverse as it gets in some of our St. Louis, county school districts. Once again I embraced my own racial habits (Glaude, 2017).

I was hired as a 4th grade teacher my first year out of college. The school district was predominantly African American students with about 70% white district staff members at the time. I had a pretty large classroom with old student desks. I was excited about decorating with lively bold colors, learning posters and everything I thought would be conducive to a positive learning environment for my students. I had 32 students on my class list, which was somewhat overwhelming for a first year teacher. Within those 32

students 2 of them were white students and I tried to make them feel welcomed. I guess I was feeling a certain way because I knew how it felt to be the only black person in the room. I was a stern no nonsense teacher that controlled the classroom. My control was through tough love and fairness. My students knew I had love and care for them in my heart. Many of my students received some type of special education services ranging from speech to resource. Oftentimes during the day I would only have less than half of my students in the classroom due to many attending special school district services and as a first year teacher I did not question it. I just made needed adjustments to my instruction and allowed students to makeup missed work. I was a new teacher and did what I was told. I followed the curriculum, teacher's guides and adhered to district leadership demands. I was known as the teacher who was structured, had great lesson plans and strong classroom management. Teachers would request my students for their class list the following school year because my students were academically on track. My passion was building strong readers and writers, my great grandmother would say, "if you can read you can do anything". I didn't know much about culture relevant teaching back then, all I knew was that I was black and the majority of my students were black. I was the black mama and black teacher to all my students including my 2 white students. I set high expectations for all and sustained a positive learning environment.

The Veteran Teacher

When a teacher reaches that veteran teacher point in his or her career they know something. In my case I'd reached the 27th year point, however I knew my experiences from childhood to adulthood molded and shaped me. I felt like an authority on this education thing. My whole career had been spent in predominantly African American

school districts that seemed to be always facing some challenges from failing standardized tests, poor school leadership, funding gaps, achievement gaps, student poverty and the list goes on.

Through my career journey I've worn many hats from teacher, reading specialist, instructional coach, learning disability/behavior disorder teacher to administrator. I felt the need to keep enhancing my skills to better assist my students of color. I had fallen into this interventionist trap. My mind was programmed at setting expectations for students who were consistently behind. It was sometimes difficult to set high expectations for my students due to the fact their academic data dictated what they could and could not do academically. I was stuck with my concept of building the foundation first and adding more skills as students progressed. I recall a principal's observation of a reading lesson I implemented as being a bit remedial. I stated that when you have more than half of your students reading below grade level, remediation must take place in an effort to move them to higher levels. Biemiller & Siegal (1997) state that at-risk readers need to be given an adequate foundation of reading skills in an effort to move to higher levels of reading.

Let me start here with my awakening of the real elephant in the room. High expectations are placed on African American students in struggling school districts without a specific plan of how they will reach such lofty goals. I've served on many leadership committees, school improvement committees all in an effort to increase student achievement. Maybe I should not say these districts did not have a specific plan but plans that specifically made no sense. In addition to not being aligned with the academic needs of the student population. In many cases these lofty goals were not

realistic. Inequities within our educational systems contribute to those academic deficiencies (Ewing, 2018). Before my knowledge of (CRT), I knew something was wrong with the educational system as it related to African American students. As a reading specialist I saw firsthand the negative effects of our educational system. For many years my reading specialist caseload consisted of students reading at least 2-3 years below reading grade level. Many times, the expectation for those students was for them to master reading at their grade level by Spring in time for the standardized test or by the close of the school year. In addition, these students were still expected to take the standardized test well above their reading level abilities. I've seen school districts with extremely low reading scores district wide and building wide operate without a district wide reading program. Many of the schools operate with bits and pieces of a balanced literacy approach to teaching reading. Balanced Literacy is a comprehensive approach to teaching literacy. It uses research-based elements of comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, phonemic awareness, and phonics and includes instruction in the whole group and small group. In addition to reading, writing, speaking, and listening instruction, a comprehensive approach to literacy instruction is critical for struggling readers (Fountas & Pinnell, 2009).

In many struggling school districts teachers do not have the skill to teach reading effectively, some have no advanced certification in teaching reading, lack the skills to be effective reading interventionists for at risk African American students and funding gaps that negatively impact the recruitment and retainment of highly qualified teachers. African American students are at the greatest risk of academic failure. The K-12 education that most black students receive is grossly fraudulent. Students attending high-

poverty schools consistently have low test scores (Williams, 2017). Ladson-Billings (2009) refers to teacher preparation programs not meeting the goal of preparing future teachers to teach African American students.

Real Story

Karnella (pseudonym) was a 4th grade student who transferred from a charter school. She was about 5ft and 7inches tall. Her height tended to be a problem with the other students as it resulted in some teasing from the other students. Karnella (pseudonym) was a gentle giant and well behaved. Karnella was a struggling reader which caused academic problems in all content areas. She didn't like to read aloud in class, so I often held small one on one reading intervention sessions with her and any other student reading at her level. She felt somewhat less embarrassed in these smaller reading groups. After administering several reading screening tools, I discovered Karnella was lacking the following skills: sight word identification, reading fluency, reading accuracy, phonic skills, comprehension and writing skills. The reading screeners also revealed she was reading at a 1st grade reading level. I wasn't surprised with the results because this had been the reality for my black students. I started my investigation by looking for records from her previous school and found her student file to be empty. I asked the office secretary if any records had come in for her and the answer was no. This was something that was common for students transferring from other schools. However, somehow I got her 3rd grade report card from her previous school. She had A's and B's the first quarter according to the report card but after the 1st quarter her grades declined. Her mother stated that Karnella did not have any academic concerns from her previous school. Nevertheless she got as far as 4th grade reading at a 1st grade reading level. I

began to make modifications for Karnella and collected data of my interventions I used for her. By the time the first quarter ended, I reached out to her parents to keep them abreast that she was making slow progress but not enough to move to 5th grade without some resource help.

My first parent teacher conference with her mother was very memorable. Her mother was receptive but a bit in denial of the fact that her child was an extremely low reader. I was very careful to start with positive and encouraging strengths Karnella displayed. I then explained how Karnella was having a difficult time with the 4th grade material and I had her read a passage from our reading textbook to her mother. Karnella struggled through the small passage and I think her mother was still in denial. Her mother stated that Karnella could read and that Karnella was not being truthful with me concerning her reading abilities. She told Karnella to tell me the title of the book she reads all the time at home. The book turned out to be “Green Eggs and Ham” by Dr. Seuss. Mother and daughter began to recite excerpts from the book as if they were reciting poetry from William Shakespeare. I simply smiled and told them that it was great that Karnella takes the initiative to read at home and that I would like to see her read some higher level books. I asked her mother to consider having Karnella tested for additional services. Her mother was receptive but I think she would have never taken the steps to request help for her child. I truly feel Karnella’s height played a factor in her mother’s decision not to retain her in the 4th grade. In addition to not knowing the proper steps to get extra help for her child. Unfortunately some parents would prefer their child to be pushed through the educational system to avoid the stigma of their child being retained or labelled as a special needs student. In addition to not knowing her parent’s

rights to have her child tested or not knowing the academic expectations of a 4th grade curriculum. Karnella qualified for resource services and got the help she needed that same year. I was diligent in making sure I assisted my student. As a teacher my conscience would not let me move her on to the next grade level without extra help. Fortunately, this outcome had a positive ending, however so many black students fall between the cracks and never get the help they need. Many are transported without care only to continue their cycle of failure (McIntosh, 2009).

According to the 2019 Missouri Assessment Program (MAP), my current district consists of 98% of African American students, with 99.7% receiving free and reduced breakfast/lunch. District wide 13.1% of African American 3rd graders are proficient and advanced readers, 49.1% are basic readers and 33.5% are below basic readers. Districtwide 17.5% of African American 4th graders are proficient and advanced readers, 26.6% are basic readers and 60.4% are below basic readers (DESE, 2019). Struggling readers in school districts that are predominantly populated by African American students continue to have low reading scores.

The quest for quality education is a part of an on-going struggle of African Americans. Teacher preparation programs fail to meet the needs of preparing teachers to teach children of color (Ladson-Billings, 2000). McIntosh (2009) claims as long as issues such as race, white privilege, and all other terms associated with the oppression of people of color, education will continue to fail black students. I have worked in districts where less than 20% of 3rd and 4th graders are proficient and advanced readers districtwide. I have worked in elementary buildings where 60% to 70% of 1st-5th grade students are below grade level readers (DESE, 2019).

I have seen many students like Karnella (pseudonym) that lack the necessary reading foundation skills needed to become proficient readers. However, many of these students are moved along to continue the cycle of academic failure.

COVID 19

As I looked at the impact of the COVID 19 and its destruction of the black communities as well as the poor, one can only feel stress, hopelessness, anger and pain. I watched the news as black community leaders advocated for testing and help for the marginalized communities. Is it not apparent that the communities impacted the most needed extra help? Does Interest Convergence have to kick in before marginalized communities are considered? Communities and school districts that are in opportunity deserts are struggling to meet basic needs along with the grim thought of dying. Schools in opportunity deserts are trying to make a difference as they attempt to keep up with the more affluent and resource rich white districts. A lot of those parents in opportunity deserts are trying to keep their kids fed and healthy. In addition, some families lack the technology needed to access online learning (Payne, 2003). I think to myself, “how are we going to address virtual learning when some schools don’t have enough resources during the regular school year.” So, struggling districts are left with the perfect affluent white school district models of virtual learning but struggling districts must make due and hope for the best. Speaking from my own experiences with virtual learning, a plethora of inequities for my black students were very obvious. Many elementary buildings did not have enough student devices, student homes did not have access to the internet, many working parents could not assist their child during virtual learning in addition to teachers having last minute or no professional development training related to Google Classroom

or other learning platforms. Placing black students at higher risk of academic failure continues to exist (Anderson, Dixon, & Donner, 2017).

Black people have become accustomed to being the last on the list, possibly conforming to racial habits (Glaude, 2017). We continue to be devalued, disposable and willfully forgotten. We usually must protest and scream out loud to get what we should have gotten in the first place. Many school districts located in opportunity deserts are in a dilemma as to how to move forward in supporting instruction for their students. As noted by Kozol (1991) great inequities exist between the schooling experiences of white middle class students and those of poor African American students.

When Eagles Meet Mountains: A Social Worker's Lens on How Trauma, Poverty, and Community Violence Can Impact Learning and Motivation in African American Students

Humble Beginnings for an Eagle

It started with a simple question from an eight-year-old inquisitive mind wanting to understand where do babies come? This would be when I learned how babies were born, and that I was adopted by my family because my adopted mother was unable to have children. She took the time to explain babies arrived in the world for mothers to love rather they gave birth to them or not. I do not think I really understood what my mother was really sharing with me at that time. All I remember is she did a great job making me feel special because she and my father were given the opportunity to choose to love and provide a home for me and allow me to always feel wanted. Something they both considered a gift in their lives. It wouldn't be until I was much older that I would find myself questioning why my birth mother decided to give me up for adoption. My birth certificate states I was born in St. Louis, MO, on January 23rd, 1970 in the county hospital. I was placed in my adoptive home for care at three months old, and adopted at nine months old to my lower middle class African American parents who were both 38 years old. My adopted father worked as a bottler at Pepsi Cola Bottling Company and my mother was a homemaker who cared for me attentively while my father worked diligently for this company for 33 years. My mother would sometimes clean houses for upper class white families to help the household with extra income when she and my father had special projects they wanted to accomplish. Our breadwinner family would have me as their only child to raise and leave their personal legacy. Both my parents migrated from

the south. My father was from Jonestown, Mississippi, where he migrated to Memphis, Tennessee when he was 16 years old after having an altercation with a white male teen his age. His brothers and family were concerned that this incident could be detrimental to his very safety and life, so he immediately left Mississippi to go and live with an older brother who resided there. My father's life had not been easy at all. He experienced the loss of his mother at the age of seven and was raised by a father who spent most of his time working late hours and chasing women, instead of raising his seven children from his deceased wife. My father only had an eighth-grade education and was never encouraged to pursue education as an option to create a better future for himself. After fleeing this life changing event, my father would start working immediately to care for himself in a factory position until two years later when he joined the army. My mother is from Little Rock, Arkansas, and lived between her mother and her dad after they divorced when she was only five years old. My mother only obtained a seventh-grade education in her lifetime and she would begin working as a housekeeper in upper-middle class white family's homes as a living. My mom was on her second marriage when she met my dad. She had married early at the age of 15, to escape the abuse of her step mother when she visited her father during the summer. Her parents had shared custody since the divorce and my mom found it unbearable to visit a place that would constantly emotionally and physically abuse her. Her first marriage would only last a couple years before ending for her to begin her young adult life with her older sister in Memphis Tennessee. It was in this location she would meet, date, fall in love, and marry her second husband, my father. After marriage they moved to St. Louis, Missouri to start their new lives together. My adopted family's history of trauma and low education pushed them to

always advocate and instill in me the need to pursue a college education. They both wanted me to have options from a good education they never had due to their disenfranchised circumstances during an era of racism and poor equity in education. As a result in my home, education was the one thing they expected me to excel and work hard achieving because they were never given the support or the opportunity to explore. As a couple they were determined to offer their child what they were never encouraged nor supported to pursue in their young lifetime. We are learning that remaining silent about family pain is rarely an effective strategy for healing from childhood trauma (Wolynn, 2016.)

For me, school was a place to socialize and make friends. I enjoyed going to school to build relationships and have fun. I was not a student who loved school at that time because my teachers made this experience for me anything but enlightening or fun. My first memory of racism as a child was in the 2nd grade where I had a teacher, Ms. Savoy, who was a white nun with strict discipline practices. I remember her constantly making my learning experience anything but pleasant. I begin to dislike school because I came to know it as a space where humiliation and embarrassment was ever present. This teacher had five rulers taped together that she would use on her students' hands when they talked in class or disrupt the learning environment. I was constantly that student who would get hit on the hands with the ruler because I was the social butterfly in class. The moment I completed my work in class, I would become bored and start talking to my peers around me to fill the time without anything constructive to do. This would land me getting called to the front of the class to have an example made out of me for disrupting the class talking again. Eventually my spirit was broken from the constant humiliation in

class where I stopped talking and disrupting class, but I also stopped working to my educational potential because nothing ever felt good enough or right when I offered my best effort in the class. I vividly remember feeling deficient in my ability to learn as a good scholar. The teacher had convinced my parents I was a student wasting my greatest potential talking and distracting other students in the class. All I remember is not feeling like I belonged there, and I could never focus long enough to complete classwork because I no longer liked school. I cared very little about operating as a model scholar or pleasing my teacher in class. I saw school as my time to socialize and make friends because that was something, I knew I did well. My parents who only wanted the best for me, would also reprimand me, because they did not know any other way to support the teacher with helping me succeed academically in her class. Even when I tried to tell them how embarrassed I felt in class from what this teacher constantly humiliating me in front of my peers, they would side and listen to the teacher, and support her emotional abuse. This is the first memory I have when my motivation for learning in school diminished. Before second grade, I truly enjoyed learning in school. I was motivated, brilliant and enthusiastic to learn and participate in class. I was eager to ask questions and share the answers I understood were correct with my teacher. The poor relationship I had with Ms. Savoy, and the way she treated me as a student, had destroyed my motivation to learn as a student in her class. My grades started to decline in class, and I would continue to barely pass each grade from second to eighth because of my lack of motivation to learn. I did just enough to receive a promotion to the next grade. I was no longer consumed with being a great student. My parents were disappointed to their core and their hearts were broken. The one thing they hoped for more than anything, seemed to be a repeat of their

lives in education. I had obviously failed at that in my teacher's eyes and my parents. So I just accepted the fact that school was not a place for me. My parents started to believe their biggest goal would be to help me to at least complete high school. They would accept if college was not a part of my future. This would be an achievement beyond their educational accomplishments in life thus far. It wasn't until I entered high school where my narrative would shift towards believing in education again.

It was my 9th grade geography teacher, Ms. Ivy who would restore my faith in education and learning. She was warm, inviting and made learning fun in her class. She saw my greatest potential and spoke to it constantly. She didn't get mad when I socialized in class. In fact, she would utilize my power to build relationships easily with my peers when I finished classwork early. She invited me to stay after school and help her grade papers and constantly talked about all the good qualities she liked about me as a student in her class. She encouraged me as a learner and told me she saw an amazing future for me as an adult. She saw me doing great things one day with my life in the world because I am so good with people. She said I have a gift to inspire and encourage others, so I should consider a career helping people. I remember these words like it was yesterday because she spoke positivity into my life. For the first time in years, I was referred to as a scholar again and someone I admired saw me with great potential without judgment. I was visible and acknowledged for my ability to do great things with my life. This teacher inspired me to work harder, not only in her class, but all my classes in four years of high school. She talked to me about going to college and how I could learn how to use my gifts to help encourage and inspire others every day.

This conversation changed my thoughts about pursuing higher education. Ms. Ivy, was able to inspire me in a way my parents were not able to tap into where college was concerned. I started working harder in school and became an honor roll student for the first time since first grade. I was propelled to not only make my parents and Ms. Ivy proud, but I would work to see how my greatest potential could manifest in my life. I was earning good grades to prepare for my future endeavor of going to college. My parents were so excited and proud of my decision. My dad still saved money for me to go to college because he was hopeful the smart daughter he knew was there, would resurface again. I finished high school with a 3.2 GPA and was accepted into Central Missouri State University where I would pursue my bachelors' degree in rehabilitation psychology.

There was another turn of events that would create a different challenge during my walk-in education. It was months into my first year of college where I became pregnant and gave birth to my son. This was a twist of fate because I did not plan on becoming a new mother during my first year in college. Another disappointment to add to my parents who couldn't understand why I would allow this to happen now in my life. They both felt this pivotal moment would cause me to give up on completing my college aspirations, in order to take care of my son. However, what they did not realize was becoming a new mother made me feel more determined to obtain my degree, because I wanted my son to have a mother, he could be proud of. An educated mother who could give him options in his life and inspire him to want to accomplish his dreams. Once my parents realized I was serious about finishing school, they both signed on to support me as I moved back home to attend the St. Louis Community College at Forest Park. My

mother would support me by providing childcare and my dad was still supporting me financially by paying for my college tuition.

It was my journey at the community college where I encountered my second life changing teacher that helped me find my calling and purpose for a career. Her name was Ms. Johnson and she was the most passionate, understanding, and non-judgmental instructor I had ever met in my life. She taught the human services courses and was over the whole department. I remember learning so much from her and observing how she inspired, challenged and encouraged all of her students to step beyond their personal values and judgments of others to seek first to understand. She taught her students, that everyone deserves respect and self-determination rather they match your lens you look through every day or live the polar opposite of your values and beliefs. I took every course she taught and I learned who I wanted to become in my career when I grew up. I wanted to become a social worker who helped support people to reach their greatest potential. I asked Ms. Johnson, how do I grow up to do what you do in education and social work? She coached me to comprehend what my next steps would become to obtain a career like she occupied would look. I would first have to at least obtain my Master's degree, and then I would need to work in the field a bit to have experience and skills to contribute to the teaching and learning process.

This goal appeared so far from my reach, as I considered the investment for my newest career endeavor. I was just completing my associate's degree in Human Services. I had already applied and been accepted to the University of Missouri St. Louis, to continue my bachelor's degree in Social Work for the fall semester of 1990. Ms. Johnson had galvanized me to believe I could be an amazing professor like her someday. As I

began pursuing my studies at University of Missouri St. Louis, I fell in love and married during the spring of 1991. At this time I was now operating in many roles as a wife, mother, and full-time student. My husband became my newest support system as I completed my bachelor's degree and began working for my first full-time job.

My first-year working was severely unfulfilling because I experienced humiliation on a job at Annie Malone. Professional workers were not valued or appreciated for their integrity, skills and experience in this organization during my time there. You would find administrators who constantly yelled and belittled staff in front of the children they served. I wondered how did an organization that was predominantly African American, and served primarily African American children, have such internalized racism abiding where they displayed so little care and respect for the staff who worked with them. I was witnessing internalized racism up close and personal for the first time and did not know what to call it at the time. To see how there were so many tiers and layers to the favoritism in this organization constantly revealed to me this was not a company I wanted to stay and grow my profession.

In ten months, I obtained another job at Provident Counseling. I left Annie Malone because I did not want to serve in an organization that produced constant toxic stress for me daily. During my time at my new job with Provident Counseling, I applied to go back to school to begin working on my Master's degree in social work. I wanted the opportunity to do the kind of work in the field of social work I felt would be more impactful and life changing with children, families and my community.

After being accepted into St. Louis University to begin working on my masters, I encountered my first racist experience with an older white male professor and advisor. I

was accepted into St. Louis University on probation status because my overall grade point average in undergraduate was 2.8 instead of the recommended 3.0 grade point average. When my advisor saw my overall GPA on the transcript, he began to coach me from a deficit mindset. You could feel the way he talked to me with judgment and disdain when I shared my requested class schedule to enroll into. He was adamant of me taking six credit hours instead of the nine hours I had on my sheet for the first semester. He felt I was only setting myself for failure and there are no second chances if you mess this up here at St. Louis University. This professor had no idea all of the mountains I had already soared over and conquered. I may have felt differently if I could sense there was a true ounce of care or concern for my overall success. I remembered my past challenges I faced in other situations when I began to feel doubt in my abilities and worth. I quietly gathered my inner strength and dignity and encouraged him to please enroll me in the classes I had mapped out for myself because I was the most capable of knowing my capabilities academically. I instructed him to take a closer look at my transcript to see my overall grade point average in my social work classes was an easy 3.4, and I reassured him I would be able to keep up in the classes I enjoyed learning. This professor continued to offer put downs and speak negativity to me in a tone that said I know you are going to fail. This was a feeling I hadn't revisited since the 2nd grade with Ms. Savoy. It was at that time I had to remind myself you can do this, sometimes you just have to show non-believers instead of arguing a point they refuse to hear.

I had to revisit all of my milestones so far to help encourage myself from the feeling of self-doubt I begin having in his presence. I had completed high school as an honor roll student, successfully obtained two college degrees as a young mother and wife,

supported my father through his chemotherapy and surgery for prostate cancer to his recovery and remission, while raising my young child as a wife and full-time social worker. I had to stop and silently say to myself, this too shall pass! He is not the author of your fate LaChrisa, you are! After a lengthy and drawn out conversation he finally enrolled me in the classes I originally requested. I smiled and thanked him for his assistance. I honestly did not feel like he was concerned and helpful as my advisor. I only felt his doubt in my abilities to succeed in this program from his prejudged analysis from my transcript. His doubt was enough to make me question if I was making the right choice returning to school now? As I reflect on this scenario, it makes me angry all over again, that I allowed him to cause me to question my abilities and worth. He definitely was not the true predictor of my future nor my fate. I would have to become resilient enough to prove to myself I was enough to complete this journey in graduate school. I was fueled to show everyone, especially myself, what I am capable of completing with faith in God and in me. I finished my first semester with a 3.2 grade point average and I was off probation. It was only a two year journey and I was awarded my Master's in social work by age 25 with a 3.5 GPA overall. This was a goal I had since my initial conversation with Ms. Johnson, who laid out the steps to becoming my best imitation of her in the future.

When it seemed everything was starting to come together from all my achievement from the numerous challenges I had endured, it was time for another shift of events to happen in my life. I was experiencing a separation and divorce 4 short months after I obtained my master's degree. There would be another lesson for me to learn and more toxic stress for me to endure. My husband walked away from my son and I with

nothing more than a note goodbye and he just didn't want to be married anymore. I was devastated beyond any pain I had ever felt. How was I going to manage to take care of my son and me on my income when we were barely doing well as a family with two incomes. My stress level went through the roof. I begin having panic attacks and feeling depressed from never getting a real break to enjoy all the hard work I constantly did faithfully. It was during this time, I was diagnosed with high blood pressure and I started gaining weight without a stop button. After reading the book *the deepest well*, by Dr. Nadine Burke, I was in a toxic stress space where I was triggered in survival mode for my child and I (Burke-Harris, 2018).

We would go from a low middle class to working class poor. My son was beginning to act out in school and I had to put him in counseling for support. I officially began feeling like the worst mom ever. All my strides and work to help him feel proud of me, now I let him down with a failed marriage and barely being able to take care of us financially. The very community I wanted to serve who experienced challenges all the time was now my son and me. My stress level was definitely impacting my health. The divorce had created a traumatic event now for my son and I was responsible for helping him figure out a way to heal. I mean how would that look, a social worker who cannot even help her own child who needed support. It was this experience that humbled me to understand where so many of my families are today. I never forgot this helpless feeling in my life where I had no idea where to turn next. My parents were there to help us along the way as a support system, but there was still so much guilt and pressure I placed on myself to figure out how to make this situation better. Healing is referred to as a process to restore health that was the result of harm or injury (Ginwright, 2016).

During this time when I shifted my focus from me to create a women's support group called women inspired to succeed (W.I.T.S.) I had no idea how this group would grow new opportunities for me as a professional. I ended up getting two additional contracted jobs beyond my full-time job. This additional income would help me support my son and me better. Ryan's father would not offer any assistance to support financially. He spent most of his time working off the radar so he could never send payments of support. So it was a blessing to have another means to support our family through my additional revenue streams. To balance my stressful life I begin self-care practices to help me calm and adjust in a way that could improve my health overall. I started reading books and journal writing for pleasure to help encourage me along the path. I needed to remind myself my past mistakes were lessons to learn more about my character and strength during adversity.

The power of forgiveness is perhaps one of the most transformational practices in relational pedagogy because it opens the possibility to establish humane connections. Forgiveness requires the opportunity to practice patience and non-judgmental skills with yourself and others who may have wronged you (Ginwright, 2016). It was better for me to view them more as valuable lessons that were making me better for the people I may encounter and mentor along the journey called life professionally and personally. One of the books I remember reading that supported me in my journey was, *Acts of Faith*, by Iyanla Vanzant. This book taught me how to forgive myself and be a better cheerleader for my son as my lessons in life unfolded. My first 30 years of life had been such a world wind for me with trauma, and toxic stress. My future goals now included finding better

ways to support my son to be better than the challenges we were experiencing along the way together. I wanted to be a parent he could always respect and be proud to call mom.

Helping My Eaglet Leave the Nest

I was once told a folktale story by an unknown author about an eagle and chicken in my sixth grade camp. I have carried this story with me as I worked with numerous students and families in my career. The story goes, there once was an eagle who was lost from his family. He was taken in by a chicken family and taught how to be a chicken as he grew older. Somewhere deep inside of this eagle he felt like he was different from his chicken family, not just a bird with feathers that was destined to peck the ground and walk back and forth in the yard daily avoiding predators. This eagle knew there was more inside of him than staying on the ground his whole life. This eagle felt there was a higher purpose or calling for his life. His wings were meant to carry him somewhere farther than the ground he walked on every day. One day this eagle wandered away from his family to try out his wings he felt deep inside could offer him flight towards his dreams he saw off in the distance. He kept trying to see where his wings were capable of carrying him. At last, the eagle looked up in the sky to see a bird that looked much like him. He called out to this bird to ask how his wings carried him so high and so fast. The older eagle landed to tell the curious younger eagle how to get leverage off the ground and take flight. The younger eagle practiced every day until one day his wings expanded and took flight taking him high in the sky where he always knew he belonged. He never forgot his loving chicken family and he came back to visit often. He used his fortune to fly high and keep his family aware of danger from predators trying to sneak up and harm their family. His

ability to fly created a space for him to be more of the protector over the chicken family who loved and raised him.

I found myself identifying with this story because I experienced many moments of knowing there was more in store for me to do professionally to help my community. Mostly because I know what it feels like to be that bird raised by another family you love. My parents wanted me to pursue computer science because I could make more money in that field. My heart just had a different calling on my life and I was well aware of this factor. I understand the feeling that the eagle had knowing deep inside there is more purpose and calling to life than many others could understand to direct me towards. I am that eagle in the story and so is my son.

Ryan was born on Thanksgiving Day, in 1988, and from that moment, I knew I wanted to give him everything he would need to succeed in this world. I knew he would be viewed as an endangered species among humankind as an African American male. His hopes and dreams would need to have protection and encouragement for him to soar to the highest heights. I wanted to inspire him to capture every goal he would set, that I did not know how to capture or pursue myself at times. Everything I had learned over my journey of being the first generation to attend college and navigating the college experience would not be my son's battle to lose. He may experience other challenges along his life's path, but I was determined to assist him with achieving as many of these goals as I could.

Since my son was three years old, he has always talked about being a doctor when he grows up. My father bought him his first Fisher Price bag and we all took turns in our family letting him listen to our hearts and give us a pretend shot in the arm. Even when

he went to the pediatrician to get his own vaccination shots he rarely cried like most children would in the office. He loved science and nature and tried to save every animal and insect that darkened our doorway. All spiders had a free ride to the outside by my son rescuing it in a paper cup to release it on our front lawn. My goal as his mother was to figure out how to set him up on a road for success. How to instill in him a love of learning that my parents were unable to do when I was child. I invested in taking my son the library or Barnes and Noble every other week, on my payday, to purchase him books that were of interest to him. I ensured that I dressed him as a different kind of doctor each Halloween when he turned nine years old, so he could start seeing himself as the professional he said he wanted to become. I looked for programs throughout his K-12 experience that would allow him to see African Americans in medicine and science. We read about inventors and doctors like George Washington Carver, Dr. William Hale, Dr. Charles Drew, and Dr. Ben Carson. We also went to see movies that inspired the heart of African American achievement against all odds. Movies like *Pride*, *42*, *Malcolm X*, *Coach Carter*, and *Express* to name a few. I always wanted him to see what was possible with determination.

After the divorce from Ryan's stepfather, his grades continually declined. I knew the feeling of losing motivation from a hurtful event in my life. I was determined to not let this happen to my son if it was at all possible. I made sure I enrolled him for counseling in school, I taught my child self-care techniques weekly and I frequently talked with him to also monitor his mental health and well-being. I wanted Ryan to know I was his biggest cheerleader and his number one fan. He needed to know I would always

have his best interest in mind and cover his life with my own. The next turning point for my son's journey happened when my father was diagnosed a second time with cancer.

Ryan had gone through a few years where he changed his mind and decided he wanted to become a meteorologist, then he was considering entomology, because bugs deserved doctors too. However, once my father was diagnosed with cancer of the sinus cavity, and he witnessed his grandfather suffering from the treatment, he was now back to wanting to pursue medicine. My father was a patriarchal figure in Ryan's life since his father was not actively engaged in providing parental male guidance. Ryan was extremely close to my father. Honestly, I would say that was my son's best friend and father figure of great measure. They went everywhere together, and Ryan was learning what being a responsible, committed, hard-working man looked like up close and personal. It was through his involvement with my father that Ryan learned to believe in committed love and desiring to be a great husband one day in a relationship like his grandfather had for 44 years with his grandmother. It would be on my father's death bed where my son would make his promise to become a doctor to help others, so they could have adequate quality health care from a caring provider. This disease claiming my father's life would inspire my son to declare his future career in medicine.

As a mother this experience was heartbreaking for me in more than one way. First, to lose the only father I would know was unbearable. Next, for my son to lose my ex-husband in his life five years ago, not have his biological father involved with him currently, and now to know his best role model and father figure was dying with very little time for him to prepare or process its impact. I felt powerless and I felt guilty that all the men I had to offer for my son all left him to figure this journey to manhood out on his

own. I would have to recruit and build a village of men to mentor and coach my son. I wanted to ensure I continued to find people who could speak to his greatness as a man and build him to know what was possible as an adult. This village would come by way of the Make A Difference Center, an after-school program I operated where Ryan spent 3-5 hours a day after school 5-6 days a week. It would become a part of the village that would help me raise and inspire my son in a harsh world that doesn't always provide equity and fairness for African American males. I was concerned because my son had lost so many quality male relationships early in his life. I had to work to build him stronger internally to face the external stressors of this world that had a negative view of him just because of skin color (Dixson, & Lynn, 2013).

This would take my son to his first encounter with racism with a teacher who taught Spanish in his high school years. She was a teacher from Bolivia who did not quite value African American male students. From my reading, it would be my first look at internalized racism within the minority community. My son would come home talking about how this teacher constantly talked about how ungrateful American students were and how she has noticed that the African American boys in the class do not put forth their best effort to learn the language as the other students do. Over time as I noticed Ryan's grade consistently dropping it would be time for me to meet with this teacher to gain an understanding how I could set Ryan up for success. I would need to gain an understanding if this was my son just taking this personal because there was some other barrier to his learning, or if there really was a problem with deficit thinking hindering his performance and classroom success. I wanted to hear her side of the story, understand from her lens, but I also wanted to ensure I adequately represented my son's best interest

if there were barriers set by prejudiced thinking. Ryan always earned A's in his past Spanish classes the four years previously and he loved learning the language. Now I was observing my son's A's turn into C's and D's and I needed to understand where the lack of motivation was stemming from the class.

I understood losing motivation first hand, after seven years of my academic life not showing me much inspiration around learning. As I sat and talked with the teacher the comments she made about my son, told me she never took time to know him or build a relationship with him in her classroom. She was not interested in what motivated him or how to inspire his academic success. She had already created a scenario in her mind and put a target on his back based on the friends he had in the class she viewed as disruptive. The way she spoke about my son, displayed evidence that she did not know what kind of student Ryan was in her class. She just chose to group all her African American male students in one category, unless they were totally compliant to her expectations in the class. She even said, I see Ryan being lazy as he uses the Spanish language through conversation. He doesn't speak as well as I expect him to as a student taking conversational Spanish. I took offense with how she prejudged my child without knowing that he always excelled in Spanish until he entered her class. She even went one step further to offer students in her class extra credit. Little did we know the extra credit was six African American male students posing as servants at one of her upscale events. I was livid when my son told me, Mom, I don't know why we are getting extra credit for serving her friends at some fancy party she was throwing. It was at this time I knew I had to go and talk with the principal at that time to see if Ryan could be removed from her class and what kind of accountability could be held to ensure this kind of humiliating

event never happens again by this teacher. After careful discussion about my concerns, he was not removed from the class because I was told it would hurt his grade overall.

Therefore, I had to coach my child how to work to succeed in this class and pass with success. I helped him know how to alienate from friends that she saw that created challenges for the teacher, so she did not group them all together. I had to constantly coach and encourage him to finish with success, even though I knew his treatment was not totally fair. Again, I had to explain to him how the world does not always work from a place of equality, that is why Dr. Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi worked so hard to find nonviolent ways to fight for it. He was becoming one of those freedom fighters by treating her with kindness, even though that was not her treatment of him. It was Interest Convergence as discussed in (CRT), but from a parent's lens to support my son's grade in the class (Dixson & Lynn, 2013). It may not have been the best choice, but it was the only one I knew to use at that time. I was still learning this parenting 101 everyday myself, and I may not have always given the best advice, but my intentions were always to set Ryan up for his greatest success in the long run. He did pass the class with a C plus, but after this class, my son never entered another Spanish class to learn. She had won in a sense because she took his love of learning a language away because of her unfair treatment. Our lesson of lemon to lemonade, left an emotional scar for us both. For me, I questioned, what could I have done better to support him to fight this injustice in the Spanish class. All I knew I could do at the time was educate my son at 15 years of age, about the talk, so many African American parents have with their male children, about race and how to respond if you stopped by the police so we can live to fight another day together. This incident forced me to prepare differently for my son's future by

looking into resources that would help me prepare my son's future. The best revenge we have in these instances is our success over their deficit thoughts of our abilities. We would embark on one more incident together that would attempt to break my son's spirit toward accomplishing his lifelong dream. This event would occur the summer of his freshman year in the six-year Medical Program he was admitted into in 2007.

Ryan needed to complete his advanced Chemistry class with a B or better in three-week's time to start the program in the fall of 2007. Ryan fell short of this goal by two points with a 78 percent in the class. This would dismiss him from the program to begin as a liberal arts major in UMKC's undergraduate program. My son was devastated. He told me he felt like he failed everyone that believed in him. It was so hard for me to watch him in this space. I knew he gave it his all. He decided to work that summer in Freedom School as a teacher and take this advanced class while supporting a community program he spent most of his childhood life as a tutor and step team leader. He already felt the weighted pressure of defeat to only go and sit in a college advisor's seat who would make him question his abilities and worth. Lucky for Ryan, his cheerleader mother was sitting right there ready to take the lead when this advisor stepped out of her lane and shared the statistics about my son having an opportunity to be admitted again in the six-year medical program. Through my eyes, she was utilizing her deficit mindset of my son to give him a dose of reality where entering back into this program was concerned. What she was about to do could make or break my son's motivation to overcome this challenge he was facing. I was in protective mode to ensure she did not cause more harm and defeat then he was already experiencing. I spent the night before we met with her, researching the classes he would need to take in the program for his liberal arts degree. I took the

initiative to put together the schedule he would need to stay on track for success when Ryan would be admitted back into the program. As I gave her Ryan's schedule, she tried to convince us he should take classes that would not align with his goal we had set. She was suggesting classes like exploring the campus 101, and how to find your student union 102 for 1 credit hour a piece. I politely but sternly declined to stick to the class schedule I put together that would allow him to follow his back into the program. My son had made a promise to keep for his grandfather, it was my responsibility to ensure he was prepared with every possible resource to support his greatest potential. I was determined to research, network, and locate every possibility other affluent students may have access to, in support of his dream having a chance to manifest, even if it took every breath in my body to help him. This setback for Ryan was now creating a financial challenge for us to overcome. By him becoming an undergraduate student that would take much of the funding support we had with the six year medical program off the table. I had recently been laid off from my job of 10 years to accept a job making a five thousand dollar decrease in salary.

I was worried beyond words that I would let Ryan down, because I had only saved enough money to carry one semester at the school. What would his next semester become? Would I have to bring him home his second semester? I knew this would derail his dreams if I was not able to come up with funding for next semester. I did not have enough to pay for his meal plan or room and board. I just told him with faith and conviction, somehow everything's going to work out. Even though I did not totally understand how this statement would honestly happen. Prayer became my best friend as in so many other times of challenge as a parent with my son. I begin to research again,

what could we do to keep Ryan on course and help me stay motivated at the same time. I began telling my son to visit the financial aid office every other day to see if any scholarships had been returned for students choosing not to attend UMKC? Were there funds available through now through the work study program he may have access to help with her room, board and meals. He honored this request even when he thought it was a waste of time. He reported each time, mom they said nothing is available, but they will let me know if anything changes. I encouraged him to build a relationship with Ms. Williams, the financial aid office director. I encouraged him to always request to speak to her in the office, and ask her personally what may be available in the near future for him to apply. After three faithful weeks and about 8 visits to this office, Ryan called and said mom I have an interview for a position in work study. He interviewed the next day and obtained the position of financial aid paraprofessional. This position landed him working in an office making three dollars more than the average work study program student. He even landed working in the office right next to the director when most work study students worked in the cubicle.

My prayers had been answered. Things were starting to look up again for Ryan's journey. Some may think this was from persistence or commitment to finding a way out of no way to obtain funding in order to help him pay for the remainder of his semester. However, I attribute it to my faith in God and how my spirituality guided me to share a way to get his needs met. Ryan also acquired two additional grants and a scholarship to help him pay off his remaining balance for that semester and totally covered the next semester's tuition. I was so grateful and proud of him for listening to me and following my instruction even though we both had no idea how it would all turn out. I was just

utilizing my spirituality to find a way out of situations that felt impossible. My faith would be my guiding force, as I had used since his amazing birth. There would be numerous challenges along the way for my son through his medical school journey, but one of the most amazing blessings was how I continued to encourage and coach him in the beginning when his confidence was lower to achieve his lifetime dream. He and I worked together to discuss points to highlight when he wrote his essay to reapply into the UMKC six-year medical school program again.

Through all the challenges we experienced year one, Ryan was accepted back in the program. He completed medical school with success and works as a primary care physician today in Kansas City. He is currently supporting under-insured and uninsured patients from marginalized communities everyday who need health care equity. This is a journey I could not have witnessed come to pass without the support of a village, working to find resources and opportunities to support his journey and the faith that has guided me every day as a parent to help him accomplish his dreams. I learned a lot from this personal experience as a parent that I felt could benefit other parents and families in my community. I decided I wanted to serve other families and children to find ways to help their children achieve their dreams too. I wanted to reach back and support other families that lacked knowledge and opportunities as I faced as a first-generation college student. I wanted to encourage and mentor students that lacked motivation just like I did seven years of my academic life due to teachers with deficit mindsets discouraging their dreams.

Some educators never take the time to see students' true potential or work to inspire families that never understood how to support their children's education. I would

become a part of the solution who would help change the trajectories of their families and break cycles of poverty and illiteracy by helping set students up for success to the best of my ability. I made a choice, I would become a school social worker to begin as a change agent with students and families in communities that lacked resources to help more of our African American students thrive and succeed academically. I was especially interested in supporting our African American males who struggled the most in this dynamic and journey according to the research I have read.

Mountains Make You Soar Higher

In the fall 2008, I began my journey working in the public school sector as a school social worker. I felt this is where I always wanted to belong as a professional. I enjoyed working closely with students and encouraging parents and families to access resources they may not have been aware existed to support their various needs in the community.

My first role as a school social worker started in Wellston Public schools in Saint Louis, Missouri. At the time, I began working with the district, I was the only social worker to serve the whole district of students from Pre-K through 12. This was a challenge to say the least. Many times I felt like I was working to put a band-aid on a gunshot wound daily. Each day I would work in a different building, serving a different population of students. I had many special assignments in this role. Some of those duties included me working through truancy issues for the district, working as the homeless coordinator, providing social skill development for the alternative school students as well as doing social and emotional assessments for psychological testing.

This was the true definition of stretched thin as a professional. I did not feel prepared to perform so many tasks in my role while still having the responsibility of supporting students and families in crisis. It was an incredibly stressful job and toxic stress was a big part of how the district functioned because it was taken over by the state for poor academic performance. I worked closely with the school counselors. Dr. Waters worked in three of the four buildings, and Ms. Burt was located in the high school. It was our job to find ways to inspire the students to thrive in a school environment perplexed with dysfunction. There was a vast shortage of resources and I witnessed opportunities as few and far between. Many of my colleagues would have to barter with other local social service agencies to get needs met for materials to create homework and school work assignments. All of us were assigned one ream of paper and printing per month each, to work with all the students and families we served. I was lucky I had a part-time job where I could go and make additional copies when necessary to ensure documents could be assessed when needed for compliance purposes.

During my two years as a social worker in the Wellston district I learned so much about community resources and how to partner and connect dots for students and families who were marginalized. I have always relied on my ability to build a quick rapport and trust relationship with others in the community to get things done for my children and families, but in this role I found this to be my lifeline and saving grace. Every day there was a fire to put out or a situation to solve. There was never a dull moment in this work. I truly understand why this district closed in the community in May 2010. The lack of resources, educational equity and opportunities for students overall was subpar through my eyes. Community violence and trauma were seen weekly in my role as a school social

worker. There were families who were consistently evicted from their homes, constantly moving in transition, house fires, domestic violence, child abuse and neglect hot-lines, students arrested for drug or carrying weapons, students shot or injured through personal assault, and constant truancy cases to investigate on my watch.

Many times, I felt more like a police officer than the role of healer and encouraging mentor I thought I was signing to become. I never said it to many people, but I felt so ineffective in my role in this position. There was no joy from the work because I always dealt with the worst case scenarios. I kept hoping in my heart that I could find a way to be more effective than only putting out fires daily. It was from this experience of always feeling overwhelmed and powerless in the work, and witnessing such a devastating lack of resources to help the families and students served in this marginalized community that I learned what was possible when I moved to my next endeavor at KIPP Inspire Academy.

KIPP was the first of the KIPP St. Louis schools to begin in 2009. I was the first support staff hired to serve the children and families there in May of 2010 as their new school social worker who would eventually become the Dean of Student Support Services two years later. It was in my role at this school, where I started to learn what could be possible working through a trauma lens with students and families from marginalized communities when resources and equity were present. KIPP had access to numerous resources and opportunities to inspire students to thrive educationally. I started to envision what could happen when an educational institution married solid curriculum and teaching with an array of social services designed to meet students where they are socially and emotionally. Washington University wanted KIPP to have a school social

worker on board who would help develop a community school model inside their first school.

A community school model has been effectively done in places like Harlem Children's Zone, Children's Aid Society and the Promise Neighborhood. The goal of a community school model is to provide wrap around services to students and families in need (Ginwright, 2016). This service may include counseling, social and emotional support services, health and dental services, extra-curricular services, parent university and community engagement to name a few (Rager, 2005). My role in the school was to grow this model while students were added on each year until full capacity in the Middle School. When I began, it was the end of the 5th graders founding year. There were 75 students enrolled in this new charter school. To share an example of how resources were not spared at any expense to inspire students, this class of students were taken to Washington, DC for a week to explore the city and learn geography in a hands-on way.

I witnessed staff work with an abundance of supplies to design and create their classroom and curriculum to support their student's academic growth. There was constant coaching and mentoring for teachers to grow as leaders in the classroom. Staff received incentives as a way to improve performance. Bonuses were given out ranging from one percent to six percent of the teacher's or staff members salary. Staff was eager to work hard and help students achieve. Through my eyes it was an educational paradise in comparison to what I had experienced all my years in social services and educational settings. By the end of the second year of KIPP, I had built programming with many partner agencies coming in to support students and families. We had counseling services from Children's Advocacy Center, Annie's Hope and Hopewell Center. Poor children

often lack access to preventive health care. Vision problems left untreated are accurately diagnosed as reading problems that could lead many children to misdiagnosis for remedial classes or special services if not properly addressed (Noguera, 2008).

There were dental and medical mobile vans coming to the school and providing medical services for students. We had nurse practitioners providing immunizations and physicals for students to participate in sports and to ensure the school was up to code medically because we did not have a nurse on staff yet. I was able to hire a parent to become our parent liaison. She was responsible for involving parents more in their child's learning and for getting our parent university off the ground to ensure parent's voices were heard by the school leader and assistant school leader regarding concerns they may have regarding their child's academic and emotional growth. Parent University was also responsible for bringing in workshops to enhance the personal knowledge base of our parents from financial literacy, employment skill development, saving for your child's college education, coping with stress and improving the families mental health overall.

In my role, I was also responsible for teaching character education to the body of students as well as leading a mentoring program to promote responsibility and teamwork among our students. There was still a lot of work for me to do daily, but the quality of the work felt more impactful to me. To see these services actually benefit the 160 students I was serving by the end of year two reminded me why I wanted to become a school social worker in the first place. I was inspired to find positive ways to help students deal with issues around stress, bullying, truancy, building healthy relationships, and being civically engaged students in their school culture. I was still responsible for serving families in crisis situations, and supporting attendance and behavior in the school. I was encouraged

to be creative in how I encourage student moral and family engagement while still ensuring we meet our state compliance standards. I had a few students that experienced grief on a major level year two of the new school.

One of my students who was a fifth grader lost her brother in the beginning of her school year to a car accident and then lost her mother in May at the end of the school year to a pulmonary disease. I had another student who spent the night at her grandfather's house only to awake to find her grandfather died in his sleep. This student was the one to discover her grandfather's death. This was the first of major incidents I saw that affected the students we served. It was at this time that I partnered with Annie's hope to gain counseling for those students and other students in our school who were additionally affected because they knew the adults that died as well. This factor showed me no matter how many resources you have access to, it does not stop life challenges from happening. I did see how resources could offer support for children with economic disadvantages.

It wasn't until year three when we started to see things begin the change. The school was getting bigger and so was the agendas and problems internally for the staff. Staff were becoming very competitive to move out of the classroom and become leaders in this school. I started noticing staff were dividing between the lines of race. We once had operated in more harmony, but it was now starting to take a decline because competition was entering the stage to perform. The school leader was making what felt like draft picks of his next in line for promotion to the school leadership team. It appeared white females who struggled with classroom management but produced solid curriculum and lesson plans were moving before the African American staff members in line who had strong relationships with students, classroom management and could calm families

where problems arose while teaching students in the classroom. There started to be a tension created where the breakdown would affect the harmony that once appeared consistent in our school. This was the beginning of implicit racism within our culture showing up as a main character of sorts. Everyone became flawless as they competed for management roles. Skills were flexed to earn those incentive bonuses and solidify their possibility in leadership roles.

At this time of the end of year three, I had been promoted to Dean of Student Support Services, where I was responsible for ensuring that all services were working for the benefit of students and their families. The departments I had reporting to me included; social services with 6 practicum students, parent engagement, special education, health services, KIPP to college services, and volunteer services. Our departments worked hard together because we were all small but had to rely on each other to get things done so students would be ready to learn in the classroom setting. I was also responsible for operating as the Local Educational Agency (LEA) for special education and conducting the student lead mentoring program as well as the school step team. I was easily working 12 to 14 hour days and sometimes 6 days a week. The difference is it didn't feel like it because I loved what I was doing. Year four of the program became harder for me because this was the time when we witnessed more staff emerge as leaders because of relationship instead of skill. It was at this time when there were many more people coming to me to share how they were feeling undervalued and stressed because of the lack of fairness. I was the mediator and calm in the storm of feelings. I would utilize my relationship with the school leader to try and help him know how his choices and

treatment of one group over another was making people feel overall. There was a break down in our great culture that he had worked so hard to build as a village.

In time the district made a decision to move him up in his role to now make a decision to put an even less qualified white man in position who would do even more to divide the staff and make working in a place I had learned to embrace and love, a place I no longer wanted to be. It would be year five that I would make a decision to leave and begin a new journey where I could be more useful as a leader in the community and education again. I felt at KIPP, I was no longer a part of the solution to the greater problem happening where systemic racism was concerned. The new school leader did not value social services, nor did he understand the importance it played in helping students from marginalized backgrounds meet basic needs, so they could show up ready to learn in the classroom for academic success (Ginwright, 2016). He just saw it as a luxury service the school could really do without because he truly wanted to focus on great curriculum design and better coaching for teachers to improve results. I didn't have the energy to teach a person who was not open minded to learn what the previous school leader embraced openly. This school leader did not understand the best way to serve students from impoverished backgrounds effectively.

My time to work here had come to an end at this realization. Everything I had worked to build at KIPP Inspire Academy was now part of my working history. However, I learned so much about what was possible when the right services and resources were connected to quality education in the classroom. My next endeavor would take me where I am now. Grace Hill Settlement House which has now merged with

Urban League of Metropolitan St. Louis, as a Director of School and Institutional Partnerships.

It would be at this program where I would learn to grow the community school model from one program into seven programs to service students in marginalized schools. It was during my six year walk in this role that I have seen a couple students loss to community gun violence, one of our students almost kidnapped from the school grounds and taken to a vacant building in our neighborhood, numerous family members loss to incarceration and my team and I learn how to reinvent these services in a pandemic that made virtual learning a bigger achievement gap for the students we serve. Just when you think you have seen it all in your career there is always a new challenge to learn how systemic racism can show up and remind you how big the equity gap is for our students in this work and field of practice. I felt I had seen enough at KIPP and Wellston Public schools to know how to build a best practice to support the students who need more resources and services to achieve academically. I found out I still had a lot to learn. I did not have the right formula when you enter a pandemic that literally shuts down socialization as we once knew it. It is now about survival and staying healthy while holding on to pieces of normalcy where you can find them.

Working in this program I have seen how poverty, community violence, trauma and toxic stress have literally made this work harder to accomplish. There has to be better access to resources and opportunities for our students and their families. The schools my team and I work in are predominantly African American students who live below the poverty line. All the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch. Knowing this factor from all seven schools I work in, I am able to see the daily struggles for our students

ranging from families experiencing homelessness, food insecurity, chronic crisis situations in the home, basic need shortages, and sometimes behavior or emotional challenges in the classroom that can disrupt the learning environment on a daily basis. Families in the program I operate, have a constant need around resources like employment, underemployment, and unemployment, housing security, food security, utilities assistance, as well as mental and physical health support. All of these needs have to be addressed before we can begin to move the needle in the classroom with children. The majority of my time is working to secure resources for my team to get to parents to help with rental assistance, material assistance to support their utilities, food for the household, employment and educational training resources to help increase income for financial stability.

Another factor that I have seen that has increased the stress of students and families in the schools include neighborhood and community violence. I have had numerous students witness family members shot in front of them or even killed. My students have walked home past dead bodies found in the neighborhood laying in the street. One of my students was in his window at home looking out at other children playing only to witness across the street a young adult walk up to another young adult, shot and killed him over a gaming system. My student and his sister were terrified to walk to school for weeks after this event. My team had to make special arrangements to get this student counseling after seeing this and find a provision for him and his sister to get safely escorted to school because he was too close in proximity to the school to get a bus for transportation. There was another incident I recall at my original elementary school where one of my fifth-grade students was abducted off the school property and

taken to a vagrant building in the neighborhood to assault her. Luckily, the student was able to distract him, break away and find her way back to the school to alert the staff what happened so the police could become involved.

My stories unfortunately are too many to share in this autoethnography, however there is one that really sticks with me the most. It was rousing because I worked with the family when I was at KIPP and now served the younger children at this elementary school. I was the school social worker that cared for the older siblings at KIPP who were in fifth grade and sixth until they were promoted to high school. After leaving KIPP, my team and I begin working with the three younger siblings in our Community School Partnership program and our PALS after school program. This family experienced challenges with housing and food insecurity all the time. The father had been incarcerated off and on the 7 years I worked with the family, and the mother came to all of the parent and teacher meetings smelling of pungent alcohol each time she would meet with me and her children's teachers. The children had excellent attendance in school because the older siblings helped care for them. However, the family constantly utilized services from our program to help stabilize the family. Our team worked hard to fill in the gaps where income and basic needs were concerned.

It was the summer of 2019, one day before the new school year was about to begin. My student Avery (pseudonym) was seven years old in his backyard playing with his two older sisters when a stray bullet came over the fence to hit him in the neck and end his life in his eleven-year-old sister's arms. It was one of the most heart wrenching things I had experienced in my career as a social worker. This student would never enter his second-grade classroom, which was scheduled to begin the next day. A family that

was working hard to stabilize would ultimately fall apart in a matter of months. To witness how the sisters who witnessed their brother's physical exit of life, would never be the same from this trauma.

To hear them talk about his death at the funeral, created a space where there was not a dry eye in the room. It was enough to make any connected human feel the hurt and pain those siblings felt losing their brother too soon. This situation left me feeling hapless again as a professional. I had no idea what I could do to add comfort to the family I had always been instrumental in supporting and finding a way to help sustain hard times in the past. To see the guilt and anger of the sisters who blamed themselves for even asking him to go outside to play shoulder the guilt that it was their fault in some way, was just too devastating for words. The local Catholic Church would offer a free memorial service because there was no insurance policy to support this funeral. The community would come together to support this family grieving in a way only their heart could express in loud sorrow and tears.

The superintendent of SLPS district attended, the alderman of the ward spoke at the service, the principal, teachers, students, support staff and our team were there to offer encouragement in a time of bereavement where mere words were simply not enough. We worked to get Annie's hope counseling onboard to support the students of Avery's class and of his sisters. The district arranged personal counseling for the sisters who grieved, we supported with programs that helped get clothing and food for the family who were under resourced economically. This child's death over time would continually erode a family that was already struggling.

The father was incarcerated again a month later from this event. Mom continued to drink and not be present for her daughters that were left, until she lost them to children protective services. The two daughters that were older that I worked with personally for four years at KIPP, moved out of the home to live with a boyfriend and friends. This experience showed me how trauma and community violence can impact children and families living in poverty, but it also showed me how helpless it can make you feel as a worker no matter how long you have done this work in the field of education and social services (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005). There has to be more done to protect our students in marginalized neighborhoods where violence occurs readily.

Social justice requires a commitment by us as scholars to do the work with communities to help them reach tangible goals, while we understand that spaces in which we work are grounded in concrete and often messy and filled with conflict in racial realities within our society. (Yamamoto, 1999). We have to find a way to become a better support system for the families that fight daily to maintain hope in order for us to maintain a shred of hope in education and social services. This experience taught me no matter how much I love working with children and families my work is not as effective as I want it to be until I work with more partnerships to help find solutions that work for our most vulnerable populations that many times have stories that are invisible to the policy makers who forget about their value and worth. There should be a tangible commitment to the physical, material, social, and intellectual support of communities that are experiencing educational injustice. (Yosso & Solorzano, 2005).

My hope is that my stories help inform practice around how racism, poverty, trauma, and community violence can really make this work hard for people of color. I

hope my counter narrative and counter storytelling sheds light on what must be done to be the change we need to see in social and educational equity in our communities. Social change begins in the heart when activists and educators declare an unapologetic and radical love for their communities and their children (Ginwright, 2016). Telling my story helps me become emboldened and empowered as a change agent and scholar in the field of education because my personal story helps share my experiences from racialized oppression to inspire others to learn from my lessons and lived experiences (Dixon, Anderson, & Donner, 2017).

Mental Health Issues Impacting First-Generation College Student's Success at a Historically Black College Through a College Administrator's Eyes

My Background

As an African American female my educational journey has been very different than the population that I currently serve at Harris Stowe State University. As long as I can remember my parents have always instilled in me and my brother the importance of getting a higher education.

Leading by example both my parents received college degrees. My mother in particular received her degrees in nursing. She had dreams of becoming a doctor but due to limited resources for African Americans including funding, and acceptance into medical school programs in the 1960's and being a female she did not get that opportunity. However she continued to pursue her education in the medical field. She obtained an Associate's degree in nursing and she decided she wanted to become a nurse anesthetist.

I remember my mother's interest in becoming an anesthesiologist. Her high achievement in college and experience in nursing made her a strong candidate. We were very excited to learn she was selected out of hundreds of applicants. My mother has always been a solid and successful student often helping her classmates. However this journey in pursuing a career as a nurse in anesthesiology was not easy for an African American female in the mid 1970's. During this era the program was highly selective by accepting only one African American student that was at the top of their class. She was the only African American selected among 15 white students in the anesthesiology program. During her time in the program she experienced racial discrimination and unjust

treatment, making it difficult for her to be successful in completing the program. Not giving up she continued to climb the ladder in the nursing field. She obtained a BSN and Master's degree in nursing.

My father also believed in education as he earned a double major in History and Political Science. His dream was to become a lawyer however due to the same barriers my mother faced he chose another path. Constantly being told by white employers he was overqualified or underqualified when trying to find adequate jobs to support his family he decided to pursue the field of entrepreneurship. He started his own general contracting business.

The examples my parents set for me are passed on to my children. Being a parent I wanted to instill the importance of education to my son and daughter. My husband and I have made many sacrifices to ensure our children receive a quality education. By choosing private schools from elementary through high school we felt it would be an investment to their future. We carefully selected schools that had a diverse environment of faculty and students as well as a warm and nurturing environment that would challenge them. The schools we selected both elementary and high school embodied a diverse curriculum and a conscious respectful student body. The school environments allowed my children a chance to see the diverse world that we live in and how they can become contributors of society. Both my kids have flourished and have done very well academically and socially. The knowledge and skills they have learned will help them as they seek to help others.

While I feel blessed that we had the opportunity and resources for my kids to have this great experience, I know there are other African American children that are less

fortunate. Many don't have the means and resources to attend private schools. Even if so, why should we have to spend money on a private school education for something we are entitled to in public schools.

Reflecting back on my parents' struggles as African Americans as well as my experience in working with families and communities dealing with poverty and stress, perhaps ignited a passion in me to teach, coach and inspire other African Americans to pursue and achieve their academic dreams. Little did I know it would steer me to work in the field of higher education, and particularly at an HBCU for which I am grateful.

My journey in working at an HBCU has allowed me to see many African American students struggle with mental health issues, but also see how white privilege and racism among staff created a barrier for some of these students to complete their education. According to William & Palmer (n.d), Black students are not just seeking a safe space in HBCUs, they are also seeking more interactions with Black faculty, a Black centered curriculum, and an overall empowering campus experience. According to Gater (2005), it is important for students to have faculty that can relate to them culturally and serve as role models. African American students perform better when educated by teachers that look like them. This may be in part because these students feel less discriminated against and more supported by faculty that looks like them. When Black students have Black teachers, they enter the classroom feeling as if they have not been pre-judged (Ford & Reeves, 2020) and they have a better chance of graduating.

I didn't attend an HBCU instead I went to a predominantly White Institution. Although I didn't experience any racism I tended to gravitate toward the African American professors, the few that were there. I recall my favorite classes were with

African American Professors. They seemed to care about my success in class and served as a mentor. If they saw me struggling they would gently offer a hand of encouragement. They created a classroom environment in which I looked forward to going and learning from them no matter how difficult the subject. Naturally I did really well in those classes.

Prior to joining Harris Stowe I did a lot of work in community organizing in addition to working with many non-profit agencies and schools in St. Louis, Missouri. The various roles I held included community organizer, facilitator of cultural diversity training programs for youth, and technical assistance advisor to grassroots and non-profit agencies. Being very active in the community allowed me to learn and witness first-hand how African American families in various communities were struggling financially, living among high crime and children attending failing school systems.

Children that receive inadequate education are ill prepared for post-secondary education (Taylor, 2017). I recall partnering with an elementary school in the City of Wellston, one of the poorest communities in St. Louis to create a violence prevention program. There was a student in third grade labeled as a problem kid, he would often come to school late and get into confrontation with his teacher, a White female, for sleeping in class or not doing his homework or skipping class.

As I began to take interest in this kid, I learned that he had two younger siblings in which he was their caretaker. He would often walk his brother and sister to school, skip the last class or leave early to walk them home so they wouldn't get hurt, lost, or bullied. They lived with the grandmother and she had revolving doors with strangers coming in and out of the house so sometimes they slept in a car just for safety reasons. This young kid had a huge responsibility that no kid his age should have.

I remember meeting with the school counselor and principal regarding his behavior, their response was that there were many kids in this school district that were dealing with similar issues. They had hoped the violence prevention program would help solve some of the problems. I remember feeling hopeless because in my opinion I felt violence was an end result of poverty, unemployment, inequalities, and injustices the families in that community experienced. The children were products of a traumatized community. I felt that the school was ignoring their needs and so many others. Instead they were blaming them for not being active participants in their education and offered no resources.

According to Cook (2015), “Black children are more likely to have emotionally traumatic experiences impacting their childhood, such as abuse or neglect, the death of a parent or witnessing domestic violence” (p.1). Many of those kids were impacted mentally and it was difficult to focus academically. Sadly, this third grader’s mental health was scarred at such a young age and undoubtedly this would impact his ability to further his education and placed him at greater risk of dropping out of school.

Career Start at an HBCU

My beginnings at Harris Stowe came as a result of me working as a consultant in the Teacher Education department. They received a grant to provide training and certifications to early childhood agencies. I facilitated training to many early childhood workers on topics that ranged from working with difficult parents to utilizing community resources to assist families. The training sessions allowed for a lively exchange of conversation. I shared important resources and techniques in working with families. The workers talked about poor parenting skills displayed by the families they served that most

often resulted in children being abused and traumatized. These were families coming from communities of poverty and crime.

After the grant ended, I was offered a part-time position to assist the Teacher Education department in organizing and preparing students to take the standardized teacher certification exam called the Praxis. This work was somewhat different than what I had been used to doing before. However with the assistance of faculty we were successful organizing this endeavor. As I reflect back, the majority of the Teacher Education department was African American men and women, including the dean and I enjoyed working alongside many of those individuals. They were much older than me with years of experience. They inspired and motivated me in working with students. I remember how they displayed so much pride in working with their students and seeing them succeed. They created an empowering and nurturing environment for students to succeed. Many of those students graduated and went on to work in the St. Louis Public School District.

As the university was preparing for Higher Learning Accreditation the department made a shift in my status. I was offered a full time position in another department because of my education and work experience. Although I appreciated the opportunity, I was apprehensive about the move because the department was predominantly white. It was this department where I first witnessed racist practices displayed toward African American students. The faculty in the department consisted of five White males and one White female. Needless to say I felt so out of place, being the only African American. I can recall sitting in department meetings and feeling completely lost and unable to comprehend the jargon they were using like pedagogy, curriculum, cbase, PRIS, higher

learning accreditation, and etc. Soon after I began to doubt myself, as if I didn't belong there.

Although I had experience facilitating trainings and speaking to audiences I did not have college teaching experience, like my colleagues. I felt they were highly educated and I had nothing to offer. I was truly intimidated. I remember attending the department meetings and sitting quietly not contributing to the conversations mainly because I didn't understand what they were talking about. I was like a "fish out of water". I also remember being upset about the constant joking, laughing and ridiculing of the administration which included the President, Provost, Chief Executive Officer to the President, Comptroller, Financial Aid Director and the Registrar all of whom were African American. This mindset and attitude comes from the belief that intellectually Whites are superior and Blacks are inferior (Dary & Rury, 2018). They condemned the way the university was run and they seem to have all the answers on how to operate the university effectively.

I was the only African American in the department and they made it a point to not include me in department activities outside of meetings. I received no training regarding the degree programs nor understanding the curriculums, etc. As I was trying to learn about the department they offered no assistance. In fact, I was given classes to teach in the evening because they preferred to teach early classes during the day. Nevertheless, I looked forward to seeing my students. I felt relief in the classroom among my African American students because I felt I was making a difference in their educational experience at the university.

My experience in facilitating training prepared me for classroom instruction and I taught urban affairs courses in which I had plenty of experience from work in the community. As I began to adjust to teaching in this department more and more students approached me and expressed their gratitude for having me as their instructor. I understood their gratitude because the department had very few African American instructors and they were mostly adjunct instructors that taught mainly in the evenings.

Looking back, my White colleagues were so focused on job security and getting tenured they made it a point to create and construct degree programs that mirrored their education and background and given their white privilege no one questioned them. According to Bell (2004) “the interests of Blacks will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interest of Whites in policy-making decisions” (p.69) In order to attract more students they needed to create more degree programs that would attract them. Since the faculty education background was in sociology they made sure their discipline had core classes in all of the degree programs offered in the department. For example, since we didn’t have a sociology degree program and their educational background and degrees were in sociology they made it a point to include a lot of sociology courses as core classes in other degree programs including criminal justice. So students were not prepared for graduate school and/or jobs in the criminal justice field because they had more exposure to sociology courses. Interestingly no one questioned their actions. The school’s administration and Higher Learning Commission approved the program. No one bothered to review the program to make sure that it was comparable to other criminal justice degree programs.

Years later when at least two of the professors retired and I became department chair and I hired two African American full time faculty members for the criminal justice program. One of the individuals I hired was an adjunct faculty member that had been teaching in the criminal justice degree program at the university for quite some time. He was a retiree from the St. Louis Metropolitan Police department. The first task I charged them with was to revamp the criminal justice degree program and make it more relevant and comparable to other criminal justice programs across the state. Within a semester we had a newly revamped program that attracted more students. I increased the adjunct faculty also in this area and intentionally hired more African American faculty. I felt that it was important for students to see professors that resembled them and would inspire and motivate them to get their college degree. I felt this is partly why the criminal justice degree program had more graduates than the other degree programs due to the large number of African American faculty.

In addition I coordinated student internships with local agencies that allowed students gain insight into their career field. Several students were hired as a result of their internship experience. Prior to establishing the internship opportunity my White colleagues were considering eliminating this requirement from the degree programs because they felt it was not necessary in their educational journey.

Students Protest

As department chair I continued to work hard in being student focused and student driven. Within time I began receiving complaints from students regarding unfair grading, or being marked absent while being present in class, accusations of plagiarism, and etc. I suspected that this was happening to them even before I became department

chair however no addressed those issues. This may have been the reason why some students did not complete their education or changed their major.

I remember one student shared with me that his professor, who was White told him “he wasn’t college material and he was wasting his money and time”. From a Critical Race Theory perspective, this was a form of racial microaggression. According Adams et. al, (2018) “microaggressions are the everyday verbal or nonverbal and environmental slights, snubs or insults whether intentional or unintentional that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target people based solely upon their marginalized group membership”(p. 22).

This blatant racism continued. One of the tenured professors who taught research methods and statistics consistently failed African American students. Both courses were core requirements in all three degree programs in the department and students were required to earn a passing grade of C or higher. If the student received a grade less than a C they would have to repeat the course. Unfortunately, this professor was the only one who taught those courses. Semester after semester students complained about the professor not teaching the subject matter instead he would come to class and talk about other worldly issues unrelated to what was in the textbook. Then he would give them an exam and no one could pass the exam. The teacher would consistently give students F’s each semester and would blame the students stating, “they didn’t want to learn”. When in fact he was not teaching the subject matter.

Finally a group of students that were graduating that semester received a failing grade which prohibited them from graduating and meant they had to stay another semester to repeat the course. The students complained to the Provost about unfair

treatment and grading by this professor. In response the provost allowed the students to retake another test designed and proctored by another faculty member to replace the failing grade they received. I believed the provost was more interested in increasing the graduation numbers as opposed to implementing a long term solution to this history of this teacher's racist practices. At that time the university was also trying to increase their graduating numbers so it was important that these students be counted in the graduation.

Eventually, after many student complaints the provost banned the faculty member from teaching the research and statistics courses, however he went on to teach other courses. Students continued to complain about how he taught very little about the course subject matter instead he spent class time ridiculing the university and the administration etc. His exams were all essays which were very subjective. Students complained about how lengthy the test was and how they were unable to finish it. In addition he never gave them feedback on the test once it was graded. Students created a grapevine saying, "don't ask him about your grade and you will do fine, if you keep bothering him about your grade he will give you an F". I wasn't sure if that was true or not, but I did notice not very many students visited him during his office.

Reflecting back it was clear this professor had no interest in working with African American students. Instead of helping them by building positive relationships and mentoring them he chose to blame them for their inadequacies. He constantly complained about students being lazy or uninterested. He talked about them not coming to class or constantly being late or leaving early. Clearly he didn't understand the population of students he served and their specific needs. When I spoke with students they consistently stated that he didn't teach anything, they rarely used the textbook and he spent more time

talking about unrelated subject matter and they felt it was a waste of time coming to his class.

I recalled passing by his classroom one day and I overheard him discussing a St. Louis Cardinal Baseball game for at least twenty minutes. As I looked in the room students appeared unengaged, heads down sleeping, surfing the net on their computers, and texting on their cell phones. Clearly he did not have their attention.

Being a public open enrollment HBCU a lot of students were first generation college students. According to Banks-Santilli (2017) First-generation college students need customized attention and support that differs from students whose parents have earned a degree. They need to feel like they belong at their college or university and deserve to be there. In addition, first generation college students most likely have a busy lifestyle that includes working a job to pay college expenses, taking care of family members etc. Perhaps this professor did not know how to relate to students because of their race and/or background or maybe he was consumed with racism, implicit biases and stereotypes. Whatever the reason he did not provide them with a quality educational experience.

According to Mental Health America (n.d), those whose lives have been marginalized by those in power experience life differently from those whose lives have not been devalued. They experience overt racism and bigotry which leads to a mental health burden. The unfair practices that the professor demonstrated I feel was a form of racism as he was deliberately denying students at this HBCU a quality education.

According to Mental Health America (n.d.), racism is a mental health issue since racism

causes trauma and trauma is a direct line to mental illnesses, which need to be taken seriously.

As the department chairperson I was motivated and forced to make a change because I knew he wasn't going to change his practices. He continued to do bare minimum work in his classroom. Since he was a tenured faculty member terminating him was not an option. The only remedy I had for damage control and to reduce student's mental anguish was to offer a wider selection of courses that students could choose from to meet degree requirements and avoid him. In addition I hired more adjunct faculty and hired an additional full time faculty member that was a female African American. This method worked because it gave students more instructors to choose from and it helped increase student graduates. The fact that I had to go this route was deeply disturbing. Eventually students avoided taking his classes and it resulted in his classes having less than 10 students enrolled. After a while he became upset because he didn't have that power and control anymore and he began to ridicule and question the new hires credentials, education and background.

My Battle as a Black Female

My appointment to serve as an assistant dean wasn't an obvious choice made by the university's administration. I remember being called to a meeting by the president of the university and the provost whom both were African American males. This meeting consisted of me, a white male in my department and a white female and African American male both from another department. Both males possess a Ph.D. the white female and I had master's degrees but we had been at the university longer than all that were in the meeting including the president and provost. The president shared that our

dean for the college would not be returning due to health issues and therefore we need to have an interim dean until the position would be filled permanently.

He presented three scenarios. The first scenario indicated that I would continue to serve as the department chair. The second and third scenario showed I could potentially serve as an assistant dean to either of the two males. He concluded his presentation by asking the four of us our thoughts and where we wanted to serve. I remained quiet, yet I was upset and steaming inside wondering first, why I wasn't considered as interim dean and second, why should I have to share my thoughts or prove myself worthy of an interim dean position. After all, I had many successes as a department chair. I consistently increased the retention and graduation rates year after year. I probably held the record for serving as the longest department chair which was at least seven years. My department produced the majority of the graduates from the college.

I felt that my talent, skills, longevity and hard work did not matter. The white male he presented in scenario 2 possessed a Ph.D, however he had been at the university for only four years compared to my fifteen years. Prior to coming to Harris Stowe he held adjunct teaching positions and had no experience serving in management positions at a university. In fact, I hired him as a full time faculty member and I was currently serving as his supervisor. This I felt was a case of Intersectionality of race, class and sexism.

According to Coaston, (2019) Kimberle' Crenshaw who created the theory of intersectionality stated “Black women are both black and women, but because they are *black women*, they endure specific forms of discrimination that black men, or white women, might not” (p. 2). Being an African American female without possessing a

doctorate degree placed me at a disadvantage of not getting the opportunity to serve as the interim dean.

In my response to the president and the provost I stated that I had served as a department chair for at least seven years and although I did not possess a doctorate degree I was very successful in growing the department by adding new degree programs as well as strengthening existing programs, hiring additional staff, retaining and graduating many students. I felt that I was ready for the next level of leadership. I felt that being an African American female was a disadvantage and maybe they felt I didn't possess the leadership skills needed to serve as a dean.

Black people have to go above and beyond just to get recognition especially if you are a female. The president and provost made the decision within the next week to appoint the white male supervisee to the interim dean position and I would serve as the interim assistant dean. My position as the interim assistant dean was to work in partnership with the interim dean on affairs serving the college. With years of experience and running a department I had a lot to offer and share in partnership with the interim dean however it was not welcomed.

As I settled into this position, I recalled being purposely left out of important meetings and conversations the dean had with other departments. Instead he consulted with other male colleagues at the department chair level and I was often the last to find out about any changes in the college. I also noticed how this dean did not work well with African American department chairs and their departments. He would often ridicule the work within their departments or would not provide or share resources that would help

make them successful. He would always side with the white colleagues and their department, using them as role models for the way of doing business.

Several months later the president sent a letter out university wide announcing permanent position for the dean. However there was no mention of my permanent status for the interim assistant dean. Once again I was overlooked by the president and provost. So I schedule a private meeting with the president to discuss this matter. He indicated it was an oversight and he immediately made the announcement of my position being permanent. Thus I began serving in two positions as assistant dean and department chair. As an African American female without a doctorate degree in the university I felt ignored and devalued and I continued to work at being seen and heard among my colleagues. The male dominated environment left little room for women voices to be heard. My struggles to advance in my career I believe is similar to the struggle that students with mental health issues have and that is we can't change the color of our skin, or our life experiences that have caused anxiety, stress and trauma but yet we are the objects of racism and injustices.

Recruitment Patterns and Mental Health Issues

After three years of serving in a dual role of assistant dean and department chair, I'm currently serving as the interim dean for the College of Arts and Sciences. As an administrator I remain student focused and student driven, making sure students at this university have a quality educational experience. My appointment came as a result of the previous dean stepping down. I was next in line for this position and yes I was ready to take on this new adventure. Being in this position has provided an enormous opportunity

to develop and support programs for students that not only focused on academics but also the whole student.

My years in working at various levels from instructor to administrator has allowed me to witness how students struggle with mental health issues. I have been keenly concerned about students that have backgrounds that put them at a disadvantage to succeed academically. HBCUs have the unique opportunity of providing a quality education for African American students and students select these universities because they want to be among individuals that resemble them, understand them and accept them, (Ford & Reeves, 2020).

Harris Stowe State University being a public open enrollment HBCU institution has been the recipient of a lot of first generation African American college students and it has become increasingly noticeable that many students are dealing with mental health issues. I have witnessed several students battling with mental health issues and have often referred students to the campus counseling office. In speaking with the counseling director, she indicated that her office is overwhelmed with students that are in need of services.

According to Chesmann & Taylor, (2019) College student mental health and how campuses are responding has been in the national spotlight. Many universities and their counseling centers are experiencing increase, and unmet demand from students (Krantz, 2018). According to national data from the Healthy Minds Study, student mental health concerns have escalated over the last 10 years. National assessment data show rising levels of anxiety, depression, and suicide (Chesmann & Taylor, 2019). In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among college students (Burrell, 2020). Nearly one in

three public and private nonprofit four-year presidents and one in five public two-year presidents reported hearing once a week or more about students struggling with mental health.

According to Krantz (2018) students today are less resilient and less equipped to deal with problems and failures. Overprotective parents that sheltered their children from adversity and failure may contribute to the rise. For African Americans and People of Color, dealing with regular microaggressions and overt acts of racism can be sources of pain, trauma and stress. For some students, it can also lead to more serious conditions such as anxiety and depression and leave them feeling hopeless (Anderson, 2020). In addition structural issues that students have experienced such as poverty, underfunded schools, incarceration, lack of access to quality health care and poor quality housing causes trauma (Ginwright, 2016).

In trying to understand the students that attend Harris Stowe, I began to look at the recruitment efforts. In conversations and meetings with students I learned that many students were recruited from inner city schools here in St. Louis and just across the Mississippi river in East. St. Louis. The communities in which these students came from were plagued with poverty, crime, unemployment and failing school systems. Needless to say students were not receiving a quality education and were ill prepared for post-secondary schooling. In addition many of these students experienced some form of childhood trauma and have brought their unresolved issues with them to college. As a result, the university experienced a low retention rate as well as a low graduation rate.

In an effort to save the university's image and increase graduation rates the president wanted to focus on recruiting students with high grade point averages, high

ACT and SAT scores. They targeted other African American communities in places like Detroit and Chicago. Again they recruited from inner cities schools with a plague of problems, promising youth and their families an affordable education in hopes of a promising future. Students from such communities experience mental health issues such as anxiety, stress, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Ginwright, 2016).

In my opinion I believe they have ignored the real issues that have affected retention and graduation rates and that is students' mental health which has impacted their ability to focus academically. It's unlikely that many receive any form of counseling or therapy for their help. So when they enroll in college they bring the mental baggage with them and most college professors are unaware and may not know how to address these issues which result in low retention and graduation rates.

An example of this, I had a female student that had to repeat her senior capstone courses twice in her senior year. When I met with her privately she shared with me that she did not have a stable home environment or a healthy relationship with her family, no one supported her in going to college, she had to work to financially support herself, and pay for classes, which left little time for studies and she was unsure about her future.

Her way of coping with the stresses was to give up. There were times when she would disappear from campus for weeks and then show up apologizing and asking for an opportunity to complete her work. When she was given the opportunity she did not follow through and ended up failing her classes. She was unable to keep a job. Her demeanor was one in which she looked sad all the time and was always by herself.

This student seemed like she was barely hanging on. After being referred to the counseling office she received help. It took this student six years to complete a four year

degree program because she lacked mental stability and wasn't receiving the help she needed earlier. In speaking with the university's director of counseling, she shared that there are so many students experiencing mental health issues and the university does not have enough staff and resources to meet the needs of the students. She constantly works overtime trying to meet the needs and demands of the students.

A Dean's Struggle

As an interim Dean, I supervise five departments including math and applied sciences, biology, humanities, social sciences, and behavioral sciences. In working with faculty, I have witnessed yet again some racist practices toward students mainly in the math and biology department. From a Critical Race Theory perspective, African American students may be experiencing faculty members that encompass a deficit thinking approach from their White teachers especially in the math and biology department.

Deficit thinking takes the position that minority students and families are at fault for poor academic performance because students enter school without normative cultural knowledge and skills and parents neither value or support their child's education (Dixson et al., 2017). Faculty members are very quick to accuse students of plagiarism. Both the math and biology department faculty members are predominantly white. I have received numerous complaints from students experiencing racist attitudes and behaviors toward them. It seems as if they are doing more policing of the students instead of educating them.

They indicated that the students have been using online resources to answer test questions. As I met with the students, they indicated that the professors are not very

helpful when they ask for additional assistance, so they feel they have no other choice but to look online for help or ask friends or family members for help.

My experience in working with the professors that made the accusations is that they get very defensive especially when I ask questions about their classroom management and course information. It's as if they are saying "how dare you question me". Students have also claimed that these professors have been disrespectful toward them, constantly interrogating them or ignoring their request for help. Students tend to avoid taking classes with them if they can. Any African American faculty that students gravitate toward they began to discredit them or accuse them of not teaching the material or providing quality instruction. The White students do not receive such harsh treatment as the African Americans or People of Color. In fact their success often ends up receiving full ride scholarships and acceptance into graduate programs after leaving Harris Stowe.

It's as if some of the White faculty members have made it a mission to justify giving failing grades to the African American students. I can recall one white faculty male who teaches in the math department emailed me one day stating that he discovered a student that took a math class two semesters ago cheated by posting the math test question on an online resource "Chegg". He asked me if he could change the student's grade to an "F" because he could clearly see that this student cheated. My response to him was no, this is unfair to the student that this issue was not addressed in a timely manner, besides I looked up the student's final grade in the class and his final grade was a D. The teacher replied back harshly indicating that "oh it's okay for a student to cheat and not have consequences for their actions". I reiterated to him that timing was the

bigger issue. It's unfair that just because he just discovered or thinks the student cheated he had the power to punish them. To me this was a form of policing and retaliation.

This professor went on to instigate the issue of plagiarism even further. He contacted his department chairperson, a white woman and shared with her the incident of the student cheating. He cautioned her that there may be other students utilizing this online math resource to complete the exams and quizzes. The department chairperson also teaches math courses and she contacted me and wanted to know the university's academic dishonesty policy. As I reviewed the policy it was unclear and outdated. I had to make some tough decisions on how to handle this situation. I felt like the professors were looking to antagonize and place blame on the students. They began interrogating and trying to make them confess to cheating. Those students did indicate they used an outside resource they gave them an "F" for the assignment. For some students this meant they were unable to graduate that semester.

As the dean, I had to do damage control and request the professors drop the lowest grade or give the student another exam. Needless to say the professors were not very happy. The department chair called me several times crying over the phone stating I work so hard and I can't believe that they would do this and I don't think it's fair that they can get away with this. She indicated students were talking about her behind her back and all she tried to do was help them.

According to DiAngelo (2018), in reference to "White Fragility" one way Whites protect their position when challenged on race is characterize themselves as victimized, blamed or attacked. I explained to faculty it was their responsibility to make sure they gave clear instructions to students on what is considered plagiarism. In talking with

students they didn't consider the online resource to be considered plagiarism and no one told them it was considered cheating until later. In addition we needed to update the academic dishonesty policy. The new policy would not allow the professors to have all power serving as the investigator, interrogator and judge as they were trying to do.

It was evident that students were struggling in the courses yet the professors offered very little if any assistance. They seem to be more concerned with staying on pace to cover a certain amount of subject matter in a timely manner, regardless if students were learning or not. In some instances students were told "you should know this" or we don't have time to keep covering the same material so maybe you should drop the course and take it again later.

In handling this situation I also felt like the professors in question did not accept my position of authority as the dean, especially being an African American. Their reluctance to follow through on my directives as well as not following the chain of command. I was informed by administration that they had to redirect some faculty to me because they did not follow chain of command. The same faculty in question not only displayed racist attitudes and behaviors toward students but also toward administration. It really is a total disrespect toward the university and the purpose it serves to the African American community. If this was reversed and African American faculty displayed this behavior at a predominantly white university they would be terminated immediately for insensitivity to student mental health needs. Furthermore they are unaware of mental health issues some of these students experience and that their actions further scars or create trauma and stress especially when they have been found innocent. Sometimes it's too much for students to accept this kind of treatment and they end up leaving the

university and not completing their degree. This impacts student retention and graduation rates.

Students Struggle During the Pandemic

With the recent coronavirus pandemic many students have been challenged in trying to stay in school. The pandemic has caused a lot of students' mental anguish. The stress of testing positive for the coronavirus seeing family members dying from this virus has placed an enormous amount of stress on them. Students and their families have lost jobs and continue to struggle financially and some can't afford to continue to pay for their college education. I'm also seeing students that can't afford the technology to be able to move to the online course format offered by the university.

Students that stayed on campus had to suddenly leave. This disruption caused by the virus has even left some students homeless because they are unable to return home. I had a student that reached out to me because the dormitory was sending students back home just after spring break. She stated since spring break she had been living in her car and now with the dormitory closing she had nowhere to go. Going back home was not an option as it was a very traumatic and stressful environment in which she was abused and raped. She would rather be homeless than to return to that hostile environment. Attending school and living on campus gave her the opportunity for a fresh start.

In addition, she shared with me she had a few struggles academically because she did not have the technology to complete homework and assignments. She was using her cell phone to complete her work. Unfortunately her professors were not as understanding and continued to maintain their high standards. After speaking with some of her

professors they did offer some flexibility. Eventually the university was able to assist her in finding a shelter so she wouldn't have to stay in her car.

The stress that this student experienced is an example of what so many other students are experiencing with the pandemic. The pandemic caused us to deliver education in a nontraditional way and this has added additional stress on students impacting their mental health even more. Some students decided to take a semester off. As a result the university experienced a drop in retention and graduation rates.

The university's counseling office has one full time staff person for a student population of fifteen hundred students. Many students seeking services are experiencing anxiety and depression as well as posttraumatic stress disorder. She is overloaded and needs help. Students are often turned away or have long waiting periods before they can receive counseling.

I think it's important that the university administration and faculty focus on not only academics but on the whole student including their mental health and well being. Students that experience mental distress and trauma find it challenging to focus solely on academics. For that reason it's important that the university counseling offices provide the extra support needed to assist students struggling with mental health issues. The university will continue to lose students if we don't address our student's mental health needs.

CHAPTER 5

Conclusion

Overall from our perspective we have witnessed and agreed that racism is permanent as indicated by Critical Race Theory. African American students have been part of an institutionalized system of racism for many years. If we are to improve the outcomes for African American students it must begin with addressing the economic and achievement gap, racist practices that affect student learning and lack of resources that support the whole student.

As African American women who serve in the field of education our scholarship of reflections and discussions in class meetings inspired us to acknowledge and understand the threads in our lives that intersected. Collectively we recognized common themes throughout this scholarship journey. Our commonalities included working with African American students from marginalized communities and witnessing African American males experience more barriers to academic success due to racist and oppressive practices and policies. In addition, we witnessed educators and school staff re-traumatized students that impacted their motivation to learn. Lastly, we agreed that each of us have personally experienced racism or been affected by racist policies and practices that impeded our learning and educational experience.

As professionals we wanted to shed light on what we have seen in our professional careers functioning in a racist society. Systemic racism should not deter anyone from advocating for change and social justice, despite how you may feel helpless and frustrated at times. As a woman of color, some of these roadblocks I have experienced are pay inequity and created glass ceilings from top leadership roles in

educational and social service agencies. This kind of stress can create emotional fatigue if you do not have self-care practices to support you physically, emotionally and mentally (Winter, 2020). The power of conversation, emotional connection and empathy is what we should use to begin the healing process in our community filled with toxic stressors. Our lens for trauma should be changing the question in our professional work from what is wrong with our children and families in our schools? The better question to ask from a trauma informed lens is, what happened to our children and families attending our schools (Burke-Harris, 2018)?

The acknowledgment of our commonalities has encouraged our personal recommendations we believe would support the work to align with better practices to inspire student success in education. Those recommendations include:

1. Administrators, educators, school staff, and parents need to receive training in trauma informed care to better support students and prevent possible further injury to students.
2. All educational institutions need to ensure professional development focused on cultural competency as related to the curriculum as well as diversity and sensitivity training to support how our staff work with students from marginalized communities of color.
3. Targeted funding to support the resources our students from marginalized communities need. Services like additional tutoring to support academics, mentoring for emotional relationship and encouragement, and counseling services to support student's mental health and wellness.

4. All staff need tools for their tool boxes to prevent burn out and vicarious trauma when working with students in marginalized communities to promote better culture and staff's overall mental physical and emotional health.

As a research team we agree these factors will support the learning of African American students in our educational settings and set them up for future academic success. We all have our own personal conclusions to our lessons learned from this research journey in autoethnography writing as scholars, hoping to be useful to another scholar along their life's journey. Storytelling has been how many cultures have helped others learn personal lessons and create change in communities (Dixon, & Lynn, 2013). Sharing a first-hand look at how our personal trauma and experiences have informed us as an African American woman, family member, and professional has been cathartic. Our voices are heard and we feel seen for our knowledge and contributions in the work (Dixon, Rousseau-Anderson & Donner, 2017). As we conclude this paper, we reference these experiences and conclusions to highlight the continuity of the impact of these factors that affect the success of the educational journey of Black students in the United States of America.

Beginning early in one's educational journey, students are faced with and experience common inequities, injustice and unfair practices, even in our modern age. The permanence of racism that our society has internalized, institutionalized in an effort to sustain racial discrimination continues to recycle itself, (Bell, 1992). Historical barriers of inequities continue to manifest within our educational systems negatively impacting black students, black communities and all the disparities that come along with oppressed people. No educational reform can succeed without teachers and school leaders knowing

that black children were never supposed to learn or achieve by the same standards of their white counterparts (Darby & Rury, 2018).

In reflection, the ability to overcome adversities and challenges relies on inspiration from loving parents, great educators, and encouraging mentors, family and friends in a supportive network. Healing can only come by way of intervention and self-care from traumatic events and toxic stress (Kolk, 2015). As the pain of experiencing these adversities and challenges can be great, it has the negative impact of altering self-esteem and confidence in addition to testing one's strength and character. These lessons are not easy to acknowledge and address immediately and learning from these experiences are often actualized through an acknowledgement of these feelings through years of practice and training from informed research on trauma and toxic stress and the impact it has on our lives, physically and mentally, especially if we are not careful to do self-care for healing regularly (Winters, 2020).

One's resilience could be bolstered by parents and other caregivers, like Ms. Ivy and Ms. Johnson, who do their best to provide support physically, socially and emotionally since infancy to support adaptive habits and motivation (Burke-Harris, 2018). Otherwise, the interactions with adults that unknowingly triggered and re-traumatized me in the classroom prevents teachers from building a positive relationship with their student sitting in the seat ready to learn. A major intervention strategy that should be considered in low performing or failing schools for students of color, is mandating that all teachers, school staff and administrators are trained in trauma informed care so they will know how to appropriately serve their students and make the right referrals when additional support is needed (Craig, 2016).

Until a person is truly healed they stay in a holding pattern where triggers constantly reset their pain and survival mode of fight, flight or freeze (Kolk, 2015). Those that experience an interruption in an early bond, like with a biological mother, are more likely to experience some degree of anxiety in other intimate or close relationships if they are not self-aware of my personal triggers (Wolynn, 2016). This may even explain why some have create distance from between themselves and others in other relationships. Everything endured in childhood as trauma or toxic stress has the potential to create personal doubt and lack of confidence which necessitates an internal fight to overcome. Having a strong support system and network helps utilize the resources in my community with confidence to inspire the best success for the journey.

A cursory summary of data reveals that less than half of black males graduate within four years from the United States high schools, compared to 78% from white males. (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). There is a lack of males who do make a successful transition to post-secondary education, their completion rates and overall experiences are not on par with their counterparts from other racial groups (Harper & Harris, 2010). My goal was to not let this be my son's reality. We would find a way or make one for him to accomplish his dreams where education was concerned. Together, he and I were able to prove what was possible with positive emotional connections, access to resources, as well as faith in our talents and abilities from God. I personally prepared my mind to understand how to help my son succeed against the numerous odds. My goal was to ensure the lessons I learned, were handed down to my son, so his journey would not be as difficult as mine was as his mother's (Anderson, 2008).

Students and families that live in poverty, face toxic stressors daily, and can experience community violence in their neighborhoods that do not have economic equity (Winter, 2020). It can rob our community of so many great future leaders, like the student Avier, whose life was gone too soon through community violence. We have a responsibility to find the best intervention practices and innovative strategies to help create solutions for educational reform, equity, and social justice. Listening to your students and their family members can serve as a healing balm to improve schools in marginalized communities. Storytelling and narratives of their lived experiences are not heard enough where policies and practices are created from my experience. It is important for us to help through policy advocacy to create better solutions for our children and families who are challenged due to poverty and economic hardship. Students deserve to have their needs met holistically to improve their educational experiences (Noguera, 2008).

Mentoring and having effective support systems must be in place to improve results for students who may experience challenges navigating their social and emotional wellness from the trauma faced in their neighborhoods. Students from failing schools tend to experience lower academic success than students from middle income households (Ginwright, 2008). Therefore, partnering with community organizations and building our resources to support the needs of the students and their families are among some best practices that are done to ensure access to opportunities happen to support students and families in the school setting (Craig, 2016). Effective strategies of mentoring, partnering with valuable community agencies, and listening to our students about what is really needed to support their learning can enhance services delivered in failing and low

performing school districts. We must all help build on the playbook that adds to the formula to help other scholars learn better ways to inspire our students who have challenges from trauma or toxic stress in the school setting. We can all be change agents who use lessons of the past to encourage and inspire others as life changing educators did for us.

Even at an HBCU, students have a wide-ranging need for the institutions and individuals to examine and address the mental health needs of African American students, especially those that are from marginalized communities. There is a bigger need to “Black students continuously experience, fight against and bear emotional scars from racism, which can lead to increased anxiety and poor mental health outcomes. Some colleges are just starting to address these issues” (Anderson, 2020. P.1). As Critical Race Theory points out, racism and discrimination adversely affect the mental health of black students and faculty by diminishing their academic self-concept, confidence, and mental efficacy (Dixson et. al, 2017). Students can be "psychologically scarred" if they experience neglect from institutional leaders and when a college does not directly approach issues of racism and inclusivity, (Anderson, 2020. P.1).

According to McGhee & Stovall (2015)

“Because African American students are victims of stereotyping, racism, traumatizing practices, and discriminatory policies and ideologies, their mental health needs should be of the utmost importance to scholars who study the systemic functions and consequences of racism and white supremacy at the individual and collective level. Those who are struggling with the multiple burdens associated with being a black student must be protected against daily

discrimination. As there is increased awareness that racial insults, assaults, and discrimination can lead to or complicate mental suffering and humiliation” (p. 508).

William Smith introduces the concept of racial battle fatigue as a theoretical framework for examining the response to trauma and the experience of stress symptoms often manifested as anger, escapism, withdrawal, frustration, and avoidance (McGhee & Stovall, 2015). African Americans deal with racism almost on a daily level. According to McGhee & Stovall, (2015) “these stressors can occur at the macro level in society, institution, neighborhood and on an interpersonal level with an individual, in a classroom” (p. 500). Weathering the cumulative effects of living in a society or being on a college campus characterized by white dominance and privilege produces a kind of physical and mental wear-and-tear that contributes to a host of psychological and physical ailments, (Abour, 2019).

Through analysis of the behavior of white faculty at Harris Stowe we’re reminded of the statement made by Wilkerson, (2020) in which she says “the institution of slavery created a crippling distortion of human relationships where people on one side were made to perform the role of subservience and to eliminate whatever innate talents or intelligence they may have had” (p. 51). Our experiences reflect that in being ignored by my white colleagues while serving in various leadership roles but also with the students that were struggling in classes taught by them. “White racial frame” was coined by sociologist Joe Feagin in which he describes how whites circulate and reinforce racial messages that positions whites as superior (DiAngelo, 2018). Even as a minority in a HBCU they held onto the belief that they are the dominant culture by which standards are

made and evaluated. The racial frame views whites as superior in culture and achievement and views people of color as generally of less social, economic, and political consequence, people of color are seen as inferior to whites in making and keeping the nation (DiAngelo, 2018).

Currently, as a nation we are experiencing a lot of civil unrest. Blacks are being discriminated against more and more on every level. Abour, (2019) states that as political and racial tensions permeate into higher education facilities, more and more black students are choosing HBCU's over other public and private institutions. This is evidenced by the fact that as college enrollment across the board has continued to fall, enrollment in HBCU's have continued to rise. According to Williams, & Palmer, (n.d.) black students not only seek a safe space in attending HBCUs, they appreciate the interaction with Black faculty, a curriculum that is African American centered and an overall empowering campus experience. If recruitment patterns continue to solicit African American students especially from inner cities schools HBCUs in particular will need to invest more money in their counseling offices to ensure there are adequate staff and resources there to help meet the needs of the students. This effort may also help increase retention and graduation rates. In addition, by hiring more African American professors, offering financial opportunities to pursue advanced degrees, offering mandatory diversity and unconscious bias training for staff and students to collaborate with may help break bias and build better habits among the students and faculty (Abour, 2019). As DiAngelo points out "racism doesn't rely solely on individual actors, the racist system is reproduced automatically. To interrupt it we have to recognize and challenge the norms, structures and institutions that keep it in place" (p. 135). Implementation of

diversity and implicit bias training is a major intervention strategy needed to support white faculty and staff to build better relationships with students to support their academic performance and success in classes. It is imperative that we address the importance of diversity and sensitivity training with faculty and staff to assist with accountability and educational equity on the campus to promote student's overall health and well-being. Lastly, as Predominantly White universities began to lay off faculty, HBCUs could possibly see an increase in white faculty seeking employment. Further examination could focus on white faculty experiences and quest for employment at HBCUs.

In conclusion, our qualitative autoethnographies are addressing the phenomena in education that are not fully understood in the scholarship community around the achievement gap, racism, poverty, trauma, community violence, historical black colleges and universities, and mental health among African American students in America. Our team explored the problems addressed in these topics that we have witnessed first-hand as professionals or experienced personally. We all chose literature and storytelling as a means to gain a broader and deeper understanding of the supportive practices that have aided in our personal successes and abilities to triumph in a culture that has layers of systemic racism in place to prevent our overall success as African American women (Lynn & Dixon, 2013). This scholarship work is necessary for our team to address the injustices facing our African American students who are experiencing challenges, and barriers around reading proficiency, motivation to learn in the classroom after experiencing trauma in their homes and community, as well as addressing mental health challenges with the educational system on the higher education level. Our team chooses

to investigate and explore how a lack of resources, access to positive relationships, and appropriate economic opportunities divest our students from the equity needed through excellent education to change their life trajectories. We are collectively and collaboratively working to bridge the gap to support our student's ability to achieve against the statistical odds.

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